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June, 1928
Vol. LVIII No. 6

Everybody's

WILLIAM CORCORAN
Editor

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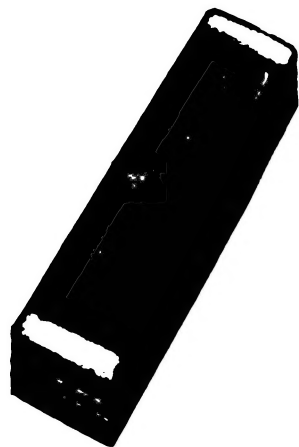
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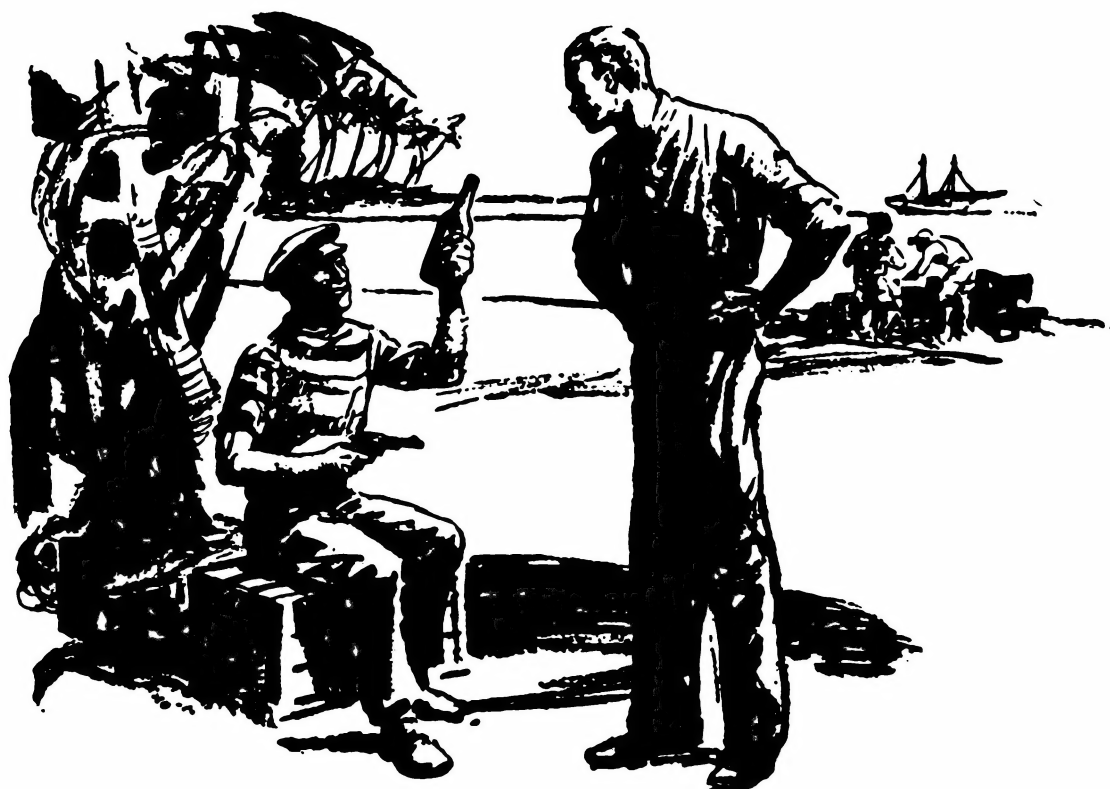
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The ENEMIES

A Tale of the Modern Freebooters

By HENRY LACOSSITT

CALM was the indigo sea; brilliantly azure the tropic sky and flecked with cloud foam; soft and soothing the warm trade wind as it ruffled the water, rustled and swayed graceful palm fronds, sighed and sang over the glistening sands of the half-moon beach. An idyllic spot, in truth, this charming cove on the Colombian coast, a few leagues northeast of senile old Cartagena. Consider, then, the mood of Buck Knight.

"You lousy hijacker; you dirty thief; you scum of the seven seas; you slimy shark; you son of hell;—" a breath—"by God, I'll get you for this! I'll get you if I have to do time myself. I'll——"

The object of his abuse squatted calmly before Buck, who strode back and forth on the sand as he raged. Moreover the object of Buck's abuse was absently picking his teeth with the thin sight of a huge revolver. He interrupted the tirade.

"Buck, you'll bust a blood vessel if you ain't careful. Sit down and take it easy. Take a look at the landscape; take a look at the sky; take a look at me——"

"At you!" thundered Buck, stopping before the squatting and grinning figure who had left off with the revolver sight and taken up with a bottle of beer. "You ugly ape! My God, if I ever see your ugly mug again, I hope it's behind bars. I hope——"

"Have a drink," offered the squatting one, proffering the bottle.

"Go to hell!"

"All right, but have a drink."

"After you! I'd just as soon drink after a buzzard."

"Well," said the squatting one, looking at Buck's hooked nose, "you look like you might keep company with 'em at that." And he took a long swig himself.

Buck fumed, but, thinking of nothing adequate for the occasion, turned his back and started up the beach to where a number of men were sweating with cases as they loaded small boats. In the bow of each boat sat a man with a rifle; on the beach, watching the men as they loaded the boats, sat a man with a rifle.

Before Buck had gone far, he was hailed.

"I wouldn't go down there if I was you," said the squatting one, tossing aside a now empty beer bottle.

"The hell you wouldn't," flung back Buck, and continued. But he halted abruptly as a bullet sent sand spraying over his shoes.

"No. I wouldn't."

Buck turned and glared, but did not move.

"Come back, guy, and sit down. I'm going to talk," said the squatting one, grinning still, and easing himself comfortably against a rise of ground where the beach ended and a grassy plain began. And, when Buck hesitated, he sent another bullet ploughing the sand at Buck's feet. Buck came quickly and sat.

The man sitting opposite Buck and the object of his abuse was Red Murdock. Red was hijacking Buck and enjoying it.

Knowing that Buck intended to pick up a shipment of liquor at this point, Red, with a portion of his crew, armed heavily with army rifles and revolvers, had landed a few miles up the coast. They then had marched overland to the cove and had surprised Buck and his boys. And, with the muzzles of rifles and revolvers staring at them, Buck and his crew perforce had been loading, not their own ship, the *Tropic*, but Red's ship, the *Old Purity*, which had steamed in shortly after the holdup and cast anchor, with the three inch rifle it carried on its forecastle-head trained on the *Tropic*. It was perfectly timed and was a neat coup for Red.

For years Red Murdock and Buck Knight

had been enemies. They were smugglers. They carried guns. They ran liquor—now that the Eighteenth Amendment had provided convenient contraband—into the States via the throbbing cities of the Gulf coast and Florida. They preferred, actually, contraband to legitimate cargo, although they were known, at times, to carry legal stuff—but they drew the line on dope. They had no particular moral scruples against it; they simply reacted to a normal repulsion.

Outlaws of a modern age, they were, and competent ones. With canny marine acumen they eluded pursuit by the national forces bordering the Caribbean and, although known and marked, they moved freely and at will, shrewdly outguessing their adversaries, and often themselves; for they fought between themselves, and they fought hard. There was nothing small about them; there was nothing mean about them; indeed, they were too hard-boiled to be small or mean, and it was grimly humorous, this game they played—so they played it.

They were both about the same size. Red, often known as "Roaring Red," because of his tempestuous sprees, was, perhaps, the more picturesque of the two. He was well over six feet. He had a face like a battlefield, and his chief features were his battered, but aggressively prominent nose, his furiously red hair, and a pair of glittering blue eyes that were hard and twinkling. Buck also was red-headed, but more subduedly, and he was equally as ugly.

Sunset found them still sitting. The hot hours of the afternoon had rolled away and the loading of the last boatload of liquor had been accomplished. But it had been a one-sided conversation that continued through these hours. For Red, with his chief aversion before him, had, with the aid of a few reminding gestures with the huge revolver, expounded to the enraged and disgusted, but helpless, Buck his philosophies and theories of life and the cosmos. It was an excellent opportunity and the armament gestures had signified that Buck should sit silent. So Buck had, albeit quite reluctantly.

When Red saw the last boat—Buck's boat, for Red was resting both equipment and crew—put back to shore, he arose and stretched himself.

"Well," he said, "Looks like you've up

and loaded my packet for me. Neat, too."

Buck remained silent.

"That was right nice, guy," continued Red. "Maybe I'll do the same for you sometime. Get up," he continued with sudden emphasis. "Show's over." And he fired another shot into the sand by the still sitting Buck.

"By God—" thus began Buck.

"Shoosh," interrupted Red. "Show's all over and I've let you live and ain't said anything about takin' your ship. Maybe I'll do that too sometime."

A man with a rifle approached and asked Red a question.

"Line 'em up along the beach, there," he answered, "and get in the boat. We've got to be going."

"If you take that boat, too, I'll——"

"Just what'll you do?"

"Try and see, damn you!"

"Well, all right . . . Say, though, you ain't finished loading. Maybe I won't take that lifeboat after all. Come along."

Red escorted Buck to the boat. The armed seaman took a seat in the bow; Red in the stern. Buck was placed in the middle.

"Row!" was Red's laconic and emphatic order, and facing the maddened Buck, he settled back, took a chew of tobacco and enjoyed the ride.

Across the smooth and phosphorescent water of the cove glided the lifeboat, Buck pulling the oars, Red talking, the seaman sitting silent as a statue in the fast gathering dusk of the tropics.

"Goin' to New Orleans, Buck," said Red absently as they approached the accommodation ladder of the *Old Purity*. "And say, boy," he added with a sudden inspiration, as he stepped to the ladder, "I'll spend a lot of jack on that hot lookin' baby down in Royal Street. Ain't you kinda sweet on her?"

"You lay off that, Red Murdock, or I'll——"

"Back to your packet, stupid," cut in the master of the *Old Purity*, as he put a bullet through the hull of the lifeboat, "before that liner goes down on you."

TWO months had elapsed since Red had so neatly hijacked Buck at the idyllic spot on the Colombian coast. And Red had discharged his rum in one of the slimy bayous of Louisiana. After

which, he had gone to New Orleans and seen the young lady. Then, because he needed return freight and didn't want to take a loss, he broke down and chartered a cargo of machinery for Panama. For Red took care of his crew. They profited by sailing with him and, although he would make little, if anything, on the machinery, he refused to let them stand the loss.

They were, needless to say, a quaint lot. Men with pasts and little future; men culled from the beaches, from the dives of the waterfronts of a hundred ports; men embittered by society; misfits; outcasts. And through the years Red Murdock had sifted them until they were attached to him by ties durable as steel. They had been with him through tropic storms, fights and chases, battles with hijackers, and they had rewarded his trust and friendship. For many of them had been lifted from the limbo of misery by Red Murdock's huge and freckled hand.

The *Old Purity* reached Colon and Red, after the machinery was discharged, turned the crew loose. Then, in company with his chief engineer and first mate, he began a thorough and systematic attempt to get drunk. Which was right difficult, for his tremendous bulk was hard to fill.

Through Bolivar Street they went, arm in arm, a bawling, singing trio bent on beer and boisterous fun. In and out through the swinging doors of Colon's stormy district they went. The chief and the mate succumbed to the pace and dropped by the wayside, but on strode Red, clad in dungarees and blue shirt, his old sea captain's cap pushed back on his flaming brow; the stubble on his face growing, it seemed, perceptibly. He came to the Metropole.

Within was the usual mob of soldiers, sailors, marines, seamen of all nations, and half-castes in search of play. Dice were rattling; glasses were clinking; smoke was choking, and the marimba band and tomtom, played by Panama boys, scarcely in their teens, made sensuous music for those who were attempting a doubtful dance on the small floor.

Something in the music stirred the pit of Red's stomach. He swelled a bit, pulled up his pants, pushed his old cap further back on his head, and made for the door with a tremendous yell.

The swinging doors flew open like the top

of a jack-in-the-box, but it was no mannequin that bounced in. It was Roaring Red Murdock indeed, pretty tight, if you asked the bartender, who knew whereof he spoke.

Scattering the milling throng, Red made his way to the bar. Men gave way before him like New Yorkers before a movie hero. The orchestra ceased; the dancers stopped. A broad and freckled hand swept the glasses and steins from the mahogany directly in front of him. A broad and freckled hand doubled into a powerful fist and clouted the bar with a mighty wallop. People cowered. Red thundered:

"Rye liquor!"

"No rye, Mr. Murdock; we aint got it."

"The hell you ain't! I run enough in from Mexico three months ago to float the by God town away. Rye!"

The barkeep scurried. He produced a bottle. He produced a glass. He began to pour. But Red grabbed the bottle and shoved the man aside. He threw himself half across the bar and procured a water glass from the buffet. He poured it full. He drank. He poured again. He drank. A third time he poured; and a third time he drank. Then, extracting ten silver dollars from his greasy dungarees, he threw them at the bartender.

"There, boy!" and, with another movement, he pulled a wad of bills from his pocket. Then, scattering them over the head of the frozen man behind the mahogany, he shouted, "For the house! On me!"

"Yeah?"

A voice behind him caused him to whirl. He looked into the flushed and scowling countenance of Buck Knight.

For an instant they stood, regarding each other, while the room regarded them in silence. They towered above the rest and they glared. Then Red's face split into a broad grin that emitted a raucous guffaw.

"Have a drink, Buck," he said, "and I'll tell you all about that hot lookin' baby in New Orleans."

Buck's answer to that was a brawny fist that shot out with all the accumulated and smarting wrath of the idyllic cove, and which caught the grinning Red square in the jaw. The master of the *Old Purity* staggered heavily against the bar. Then, his hard blue eyes flashing wrath, he straightened, roared a curse, and rushed.

IT WAS quite a battle. They fought all over the Metropole, great fists flailing. Once Buck fell over a chair and Red howled in mirth. Once Red stepped in a cuspidor, and Buck's bawling laugh sounded. But Red picked up the receptacle and threw the contents at Buck, following it with a rush that bowled over the master of the *Tropic*. But only for an instant, for Buck came back strong and Red was knocked over a chair.

The patrons stood in delighted huddles. The dance-girls, demi-mondes with the blood of a score of peoples in their veins, too fascinated to scream, perched along the bar, stood on tables, and watched with eager, glinting eyes.

They were fighting near the door now. Neither had had the advantage. But Red, circling around Buck, let fly a haymaker from the floor that caught the vengeance seeking master of the *Tropic* flush on the chin and sent him flying through the swinging doors. Red did not even look out to see what happened: he knew that wallop had gone home. But if he had, he would have seen Buck crash into the reeling and tremendous form of a drunken Finn.

The two went down in a heap. The Finn, with the peculiar and terrible wrath of his race when intoxicated, scrambled to his feet. He jerked the recumbent Buck up by the collar and, drawing an ugly knife, staggered into the Metropole.

"This faller," he brayed, "chust busted me one. I cut him damn guts oudt." The Finn raised his knife.

But Red stopped the downward thrust. There was strength against strength for a moment, but Red knew more than the other. With his foot he unbalanced the Finn and at the same time twisted the knife loose. Then backing away suddenly, he swung. The Finn went to the tile floor and did not get up.

Red picked up the knife. He threw it at the bar, where it stuck, quivering. He looked around at the silent room. He looked at the frightened orchestra. Again, the raucous guffaw. He extracted a bunch of bills, wadded them into a ball and threw it at the orchestra.

"Music!" he yelled. "And play hard!" Then, grabbing the unconscious Buck and the equally unconscious Finn by their collars, he hoisted them and bolstered them

against the bar. "I said drinks for the house!" he shouted.

The orchestra played hard. The revelry began anew with increased fervor, for in each mind remained the picture of those two battles.

"Chief."

Red turned at the voice and saw his radio operator.

"I saw that Nicaraguan down the street a minute ago," said the operator, "and he says to tell you he's ready for the guns. He's sore at Knight."

Red, holding Buck by the collar, and letting the Finn slide to the floor, walked to a near-by table and sat down. Buck was dragged.

"He says," continued the operator, "that there's twenty thousand rifles and two million rounds of ammunition at the same place, all bought and ready to ship."

"Where to?"

"San Juan—that little dump below Bluefields."

"Right away?"

"Right away."

"All right; have a drink."

The operator ordered a beer.

"Buck, oh Buck," called Red to his rival, shaking him. Buck was half sitting, half sprawling on the floor beside Red's chair, for Red still held him by the collar. "Wake up, Buck. Here's news. Oh Buck."

Buck shook his head. He passed a hand over his face. He tried to get up, but was restrained by the hand on his collar. Looking around, he saw Red, and immediately fierce rage twisted his features. He struggled to rise, but he was still groggy, and Red, holding his collar, promptly twisted it, and shut off his air.

"Take it easy, Buck. I've got news for you. We're carryin' the rifles to San Juan. Ain't that nice, Buck?"

A husky growl escaped the contracted windpipe of Buck Knight. He fought frantically to make his feet, but the iron grip on his collar twisted tighter and tighter, and finally, his face purple, he sank back, clawing at Red's hand. Red relaxed a bit.

"Try that—damn you," gasped Buck, "and I'll—tell the Nic-arag-uan gov'a-mint. I'll—"

"Aw hell, Buck, pipe down. You're all wet."

And Red poured the glass of beer ordered by his radio operator over his rival's

mildly red head. Then, releasing his grip on Buck's collar, he rose suddenly, and with his companion stepped swiftly out, leaving Buck, sputtering curses and rubbing his eyes, to reel to his feet.

THE *Old Purity*, which, despite its name, was painted a deep black, left the Colombian coast two weeks later, bound for Nicaragua. Within its hatches reposed twenty thousand rifles and two million shells to shoot from them. Likewise, although the radio operator had not known of it, there were bayonets to be attached to them. Red was quite proud of the cargo.

This shipment, he told his men, had guts. This shipment, he said, would provide copy for New York newspapers; fodder for editorials; subject for government conferences. There was class to this shipment, which would have far-reaching results, he said, and he demonstrated to them the various thrusts, counters, and parries, used in bayonet fighting. Likewise, he reminded them that this was gravy spilled by Buck Knight.

For Buck Knight had, formerly, enjoyed a monopoly in the Nicaraguan gun trade. He had, whenever the legion liberators of that great nation were moved to patriotic action, been called upon to carry the where-withal for their armies; and he had been efficient. But, unwittingly, he had incurred the wrath of one Maduro, the present purchaser for the revolution. It was no fault of Buck's, for the turnover in rebels was rapid.

The son of Maduro, acting as agent and informer, had run across Buck in a café in Willemstad. Buck had the misfortune to be a bit drunk at the time and in an argument with a Portuguese mulatto. And, although the argument was merely wordy, Buck was in belligerent mood. The mulatto was a seaman and was debating the worth of his ship as compared with Buck's *Tropic*, which, as everyone knew, was an excellent packet.

The purchaser's son, secure in a certain vainglorious cerebral state, had intruded. Buck had not been interested in the man, who did not come to his subject with alacrity, and was bent more on impressing Buck than doing business. So Buck resented the intrusion and expressed himself. Which moved the purchaser's son to further efforts

at impression. All of which was annoying to Buck, who ordered the man to leave.

The purchaser's son then became very haughty and insulted Buck and, as the skipper of the *Tropic* was a bit drunk, the man found himself, a few moments later, seated in the gutter outside, dazedly fingering a broken nose and wondering what had happened. The unfortunate part for Buck was that he remembered what had happened. So Red Murdock took over the gun trade.

All this reached Red's ears and was a big chuckle for him. But, as he neared his destination, he recalled the choked words of Buck concerning informing the Nicaraguan government, and he became cautious. He knew that Buck would, ordinarily, have done most anything to wreck him, and, since the hijacking on the Colombian coast, the fight in the Metropole, and the loss of the gun trade, he knew the master of the *Tropic* would treble his efforts.

So Red was chary. The radio operator was alert in his shack for messages, and there was a lookout on the poop; on the forecastle; and on either wing of the flying bridge. Red did not wish a fight, but he did want to land the guns.

Sailing close to the Central American coast, he picked up land and proceeded slowly. He signalled by radio the purchaser, who, with men and equipment, awaited at San Juan. These signals were in code, furnished him before he left Colon. Closer he came, and closer to San Juan, and no reassuring answer greeted his signals. But he ordered the operator to continue his staccato crackling.

Finally his patience was rewarded. An answer came. The operator brought it to him and he decoded it. It was not comforting, for he was informed that the Nicaraguan government had been advised of the shipment of guns; that they had a small force of police on hand; that they were prepared to board the *Old Purity* immediately she hove in sight; but that they knew nothing of Maduro, or who the receiver was to be. Buck, evidently, had overlooked that point in his zeal against Red.

Red mused as he stared at the message. Vivid anger welled in his chest and flushed his face, but it subsided in a moment. His mouth expanded in a smile and his eyes twinkled with humor. For, as he looked at the message, he saw, between the typewrit-

ten lines, the face of Buck Knight glare out at him. It was no time for anger.

He reflected a while. He had summoned the mate when he first read the message, for thought of flight had entered his brain; but now he had another plan. He looked up at his first officer.

"That three inch gun," he said slowly. "Is it hidden?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where?"

"In the chain locker."

"Where are the crew's gats?"

"In the dummy pipe running up the port side of the machine shop."

"Then," to the operator, "instruct Maduro to have his lighters and trucks ready. And," to both of them, "listen!"

Red outlined to his chief officer and radio operator his scheme. By the time he had finished his discourse, a man approached and informed him that San Juan had been sighted. Red instructed the mate to issue orders to the crew and then let matters run their course.

THE *Old Purity* now had rounded the narrow head of land below San Juan and was bound toward the town which lay, a clump of squat white buildings, some fifteen knots to the west. From the bridge, Red, through binoculars, scanned the shore. His vigil was rewarded a few minutes later, when he saw two cutters put out from the beach. When he saw these he shouted through his megaphone to the mate, who was standing on the forecastle head, and then rumbled a message through the speaking tube to the engine room. Both messages were the same. He ordered the crew to show no resistance. He was going to show Buck Knight that he could match wits.

Nearer came the *Old Purity*, and nearer came the cutters. As the smaller craft came close, they divided, one steering to port, and the other veering to starboard. Red watched them with an expression of amusement. He rang the telegraph and the *Old Purity* came to slow ahead. When the cutters came abeam, he was hailed in Spanish.

"Ahoy, Captain Murdock! Put down the ladder."

A man standing by the ladder, which lay in readiness on the deck by the rail, immediately dropped it over the side. The cut-

ters came closer and Red saw that they were filled with police, attired in dazzling uniforms. They stood with drawn guns. The cutter to port proceeded to the ladder, bobbing on the smooth swell, and three men swung to the ladder and ascended to the deck. Red met them cordially.

"Captain Murdock," said the leader of the three, a heavy man with greasy face, fierce moustachios, garish uniform and sword, "we arrest you in the name of——"

"A moment, my friend," said Red in his oiliest Spanish. "You may arrest me, but it will cost you dear."

"We have men, Captain Murdock, prepared to attack and take your ship, should you show resistance."

"And I have men, *caballeros*, who will fight to the last ditch. First," said Red, producing his huge revolver, "I would shoot the three of you like dogs; then my men would swarm to the rails and not one of your gallant men would get aboard alive."

"But such a battle as that," laughed the officer nervously, "would bring a swarm of troopers from the post but a few kilos from the town."

"But such a battle as that," laughed Red good-humoredly, "would first stretch you all dead."

The officers looked at each other.

"But, Captain Murdock," said the fat leader, "you do not hope to resist the Nicaraguan government and its police."

"Oh no, *señor*," said Red. "I shall surrender. But—" as the officers relaxed into relieved smiles—"I must first have the assurance that my men and I shall be accorded safe treatment; that we will receive full justice according to law."

"Oh, we will assure that, Captain Murdock."

"Ah, *señores*, but I must have the assurance of your customs official in port. Come. You, *señor*," addressing the leader, "and I shall go ashore and see the gentleman. You will leave these two here and your police shall board my ship unmolested and remain to see that all is in order. And am I not a hostage? It is the way gentlemen and soldiers settle things, is it not?"

The officer decided that it was and concurred. Red mustered his crew on the main deck and, accompanying the officers, allowed them to search the ship for hidden

arms. They found none save the contraband, and Red gave up his gun. The police had left theirs in the cutters which had been attached to the *Old Purity*, and the rifles carried by the crew were thrown in with them. The police outnumbered the crew and were allowed to retain their short swords. Hence everything seemed to be, for the time being, settled nicely. Red let down a lifeboat and, with the leader, started for the shore.

Before the craft settled on the water, almost, a seaman sauntered down a companionway leading aft and descended a ladder to the after-well deck. A policeman, important and suspicious, followed him. When the seaman reached the deck he turned swiftly and entered the machine shop, picked up a sledge handle and flattened himself against the bulkhead.

The policeman entered and the roof fell in on him. A moment later the seaman, in the policeman's uniform, left the machine shop. He approached a knot of his comrades, his visored cup pulled low over his face. They were engaged in a game of stud in the cook's galley, with several police standing guard.

The disguised seaman suddenly drew his gun. He commanded the police to remain silent and keep their hands in the air. They did, while the seamen relieved them of their uniforms and short swords, and made trips to the machine shop, where the dummy pipe dropped .45 Colt's automatics.

Meanwhile, Red and the officer reached the shore and threaded their way through the dirty streets to the house of the customs official. That gentleman, also obese and swaggering, greeted Red with supercilious and patronizing manner. Red seemed quite meek and very humiliated and regretted the incident very much. Also, he asked that he and his crew receive fair trial, and invited the customs official aboard to inspect the *Old Purity*, which, with its cargo, he said, would soon be the property of the Nicaraguan government. The official, wishing to strut before the helpless *Americanos*, consented.

SO THE three of them went to the beach and boarded the lifeboat. Red took the oars. He was facing the official and he talked as he swayed at his task. The officer was sitting stiffly in the prow. The

official looked very grave and said he was certain justice would be given, but that it was an extremely heinous offense.

"Yes, I suppose," sighed Red, as they reached the rope ladder.

Preceding them he climbed the ladder and jumped over the rail. In the center of the deck stood a knot of police, heads together, talking furiously. The official and police officer, laboriously climbed over the rail and, puffing and snorting, dropped to the deck. The customs man straightened his mussed clothes, mopped his forehead, and strove to regain his importance, which suffered from his red face and arduous panting. The officer called to the knot of police. They turned.

The customs man and the officer gargled in their heavy throats. They recoiled a step and stood as if paralyzed, their mouths sagging in amazement; for no swarthy Nicaraguan visages confronted them. They saw, beneath the patent-leather visors, the faces of Red's crew.

Red lit a cigaret.

"Bring out the spics," he said in English, "and let's get this over with."

The masquerading crew moved to their tasks. Presently, from the forecastle, from the saloon, from the poop, from the cabins amidships, poured the police, urged forward by the guns held by the men of the *Old Purity*.

The hatches were opened, not by the crew, but by the police, now clad in dungarees lent by their captors. The winches were worked, not by the crew, but by the peculiarly clad police. Maduro, who had been informed, immediately Red set out from shore with the official and the officer, now came aboard. His lighters had drawn alongside, and several of the disguised police, covered by several of the uniformed crew, boarded these craft and the unloading went on.

For a space the official and the officers stood speechless. When the situation, incredible as it was, struck them with its full significance, a mongrel anger, Latin and Indian, mounted their necks and sent dark blood surging to their faces. They threatened and stormed; gestured and flung themselves about in hopeless frenzy, while Red, seated on a bitt, laughed and conversed with Maduro, who stood by, directing the men on the lighters.

"*Caballeros*," said Red. "It is useless

to carry on so foolishly. You will certainly overheat yourselves."

"Swine!" screamed the customs official. "You shall pay for this insult; this treachery. Spawn of the devil! You shall pay!" And, already close to the laughing Red, he edged even closer.

The movement was misguided, for he jostled Red and the brawny master of the *Old Purity* lost his balance and went sprawling over backwards. He rose, bawling and swearing, and, grabbing the now cringing official, reseated himself on the bitt, turned the man over his knees, and whacked the fat hams with his huge and freckled hand.

By sunset the cargo was discharged. The last lighter had moved; the last truck had rumbled off into the jungle, where carts, already waiting, would take the arms and ammunition to the headquarters of the rebels. And the *Old Purity* was steaming away from San Juan.

On her bridge stood her master, caparisoned in the uniform of a Nicaraguan police officer. And his crew, from mates and engineers to deckboys, were similarly clad, save for the steward, who had appropriated the clothes of the customs official. Still attached to the ship were the cutters, now empty of guns, but filled with shivering men in various degrees of nudity. Red drew the officer's sword. He yelled a command and brought down the sword to order its executions. Immediately the lines by which the cutters were made fast to the ship were let go and the small craft fell behind.

Beside Red stood Maduro, smiling and complacent, for his work was finished and he was leaving Nicaragua for the time being. The master of the *Old Purity* was thoughtful. He stood, leaning on the rail, gazing at the sea.

"Buck," he said, half to himself, "almost got me that time."

"*Como?*"

Red looked up sharply into the inquiring face of Maduro and made a note that it was none of the man's business. But he was not angry; his mood, strangely enough, was quite placid. He watched the surging bow wave; he noticed the rising moon slowly emerge from the silken, rolling waves; he contemplated the rippling silver path cast by the Evening Star, and an unaccountable sadness crept over him. He remained thus, in reverie so intense that he was not con-

scious of it, for some time. Then he suddenly remembered Maduro's query.

"Buck," he said, almost mechanically, "almost got me that time."

"Captain Knight?"

"Yes."

Neither spoke for the moment. Then, "I have news for you," said Maduro. And, when Red remained silent, he continued, "My son, you know, is in Curaçao. He says that Knight is there. He says that you have a cargo of rum at Oruba; and that you, as soon as you have set me safely in Colombia, will proceed to get it. Also, he says, Knight knows of it, and, should you escape the trap at San Juan, intends to inform the United States officials. Knight has legitimate cargo for Florida and will trail you, giving your position to the Coast Guard."

Red looked at his informant keenly. Then, relaxing, and staring idly at the water, he said, "And how did your son find all this out?"

"From a café waiter. The man heard Knight and his chief officer talking over their whisky."

Red nodded. "*Gracias, señor,*" he said.

Maduro left and retired. Red stood, gazing at the mounting moon. He had forgotten the crazy uniform and sword he wore. He did not know it, but he was smiling; and his battered face was pleasant to look upon.

MADURO had been deposited safely on the Colombian coast, and the *Old Purity* rode at anchor off Oruba. But, since she had been there, she had changed her spots. No longer did her faithful bulk rear blackly upon the blue—she now was whiter than a yacht. Only her stack retained its original sable shade; the rest of her was as white as her name should indicate. And the name had been painted over.

Red, before this paint job was started, had investigated and found that Maduro spoke truthfully. Buck did mean to inform the Coast Guard and he was in ugly mood. He was in Willemstad and Red had been conveyed there by a launch provided by the rum exporters. But he avoided Buck. He did not wish a personal encounter—then.

He loaded the rum and purposely let it be known in Willemstad when he was sailing. When about four hours on his course, Maduro's son, through the French Cables,

radioed him that Buck had started on the trail.

Red was bound for Florida; so was Buck. But Red was to be met, not far from Tampa, by agents of the importers and the rum was to be run in in fast launches. Buck was bound for Tampa too, for he planned to be present at his rival's debacle.

Not many hours out of Oruba, Red brought out his three inch gun and mounted it on the forecastle-head. And his radio operator was stationed constantly in the shack, sending the position of the *Old Purity* at regular intervals. Of course Buck's operator on the *Tropic* picked up these messages. According to them the *Old Purity* was on her scheduled course, which she was.

They proceeded thusly until shortly after midnight of the fourth day the *Old Purity* entered the Gulf of Mexico. She was headed straight for Tampa, and the *Tropic* was still trailing her and still out of sight.

Red was peculiarly on edge. For once in his life he was noticeably nervous. And his crew, sympathetically, were equally tense. They were ready, each armed with a Colt's .45. Three of them manned the three inch gun. They awaited the zero hour, two o'clock, and when it came the *Old Purity* suddenly described a circle and doubled on her course.

There was no moon. The night was pitchy, and, as soon as she turned, her mast lights were extinguished. Full ahead, she sailed, back over the course she had been following. And it was not long until over the southern horizon appeared red and green lights—the *Tropic* steaming along the trail. Red's operator flashed the position, but it was not the position the *Old Purity* actually occupied; it was a position several knots ahead.

Further along, Red threw his spotlight far ahead, and left it on. Just below its brilliance, as the light suffused into the darkness, there was dimly perceptible, on the forward flagstaff of the *Old Purity*, the ensign of the Coast Guard. Manipulating the spot, Red soon found the *Tropic* and held it in the brilliant light. He knew that Buck, as soon as the brilliant shaft shot suddenly out of the darkness and hit the *Tropic*, would use binoculars; and he knew that the Coast Guard emblem would be faintly visible.

Closer they came, until the outlines of

the two ships were plainly visible, the *Old Purity* but a white splotch behind the brilliant spotlight, the *Tropic* looming up plainly. The three inch gun fired a shot across the bow of the *Tropic*, and the *Old Purity* steered close. To Buck and his crew the ship bearing down on them had the appearance of one of those privateers mustered in by the government. And, as Buck was a true smuggler, he reacted to usual instinct, and he knew that such a ship carried many men and adequate armament. Besides, for once, he had legitimate cargo, and was himself bent on the capture of a rum runner. So he was elated in his waiting and hence, incautious. He brought the *Tropic* to a stop, as the other ship, spotlight flooding his own craft, drew close.

The light was blinding and all that his crew saw, standing on the forward well deck, were several lines thrown from the deck of the other ship. These they caught and made fast. They did not see the prow of the supposed government craft—the engines of which were still throbbing—as it swung in close to their stern. And they did not see a number of men suddenly arise from prone positions on the deck and jump from its forecastle to their poop. For Red, with most of his crew, was boarding the *Tropic*.

A man at the helm, a mate at the spotlight; an engineer below; and three men on the after well deck, were all that remained behind on the *Old Purity*. And, as soon as their work was done, these men ran forward to swing across on lines to the *Tropic* and join their master, for the boarding party had made the ships fast at their end.

Buck and his crew, standing in the blinding light, waited expectantly for a uniformed officer and his men to come to the rail opposite and begin questioning, or for a gangway to be thrown between the two ships. Instead, just as the east became gray, and dawn crept over the horizon, they were startled into momentary immobility by a rush of men that spilled suddenly from their main deck amidships and bore down on them.

No guns unless necessary, Red had said, and his crew obeyed him. They charged the amazed and bewildered, the half blinded men of the *Tropic*, using only their fists; but so complete was the surprise that their first rush met no resistance. They easily bowled over the rival crew and only when

Buck recognized the yell of Red Murdock, did they meet any resistance.

The men of the *Tropic* fought, then, but that initial rush had demoralized them. Many were already knocked out, and those that remained fought a losing battle. Only one happened to be armed, and he, as he drew his gun, received a bullet through the shoulder and fell heavily to the deck from the hatch where he stood. They surrendered at that. The engineers had been overpowered, too, and brought on deck. But they, as well as the crew of the *Old Purity* who stood over them with drawn revolvers, turned to watch, on the top of a hatch, the battle of their masters. For Red had sought out Buck—and Buck had not been found hiding.

They fought again, these rivals, these outlaws, these enemies, as they had fought many times before; and they fought fair. Not that they were averse to other methods; they were not, for they had both used them often, but they did not think of them when they fought each other. Their private fight was a sporting affair.

They stood, toe to toe, slugging. They did not feint; they did not box; they thought of neither, and they gave as they took, blow for blow. They maneuvered, it is true, but only by instinct, to give more force to their blows. Their faces were streaming and their shirts were torn. Their mops of red hair bobbed violently as they landed. Occasionally they clinched, but they shook each other off and battered at long range again. They forgot the crews; it is even possible they forgot their enmity. It was anybody's fight, and the crews forgot their recent one. This was a battle of giants.

Red went down first, rolling to the edge of the hatch. Buck followed to get him as he arose, but he gathered himself, and fairly sprang from the hatch and caught Buck in the stomach as he came forward. The *Tropic's* master grunted heavily and gave ground—but at a price.

But Red's blow to the wind told. Buck favored his stomach and Red pressed in. He rushed again and again, and slowly the master of the *Tropic* neared the edge of the hatch. As Buck backed away Red started a left to the stomach. Buck dropped his hands to block it. He did, partially, but, as in the Metropole in Colon, Red's battering fist caught him flush on the chin, and he

toppled backwards off the hatch to land sprawling on the steel deck. So did Red, for the force of the blow had overbalanced him, and he fell forward, landing with his hands on either side of his prone rival.

Buck was out, and lay motionless. But equally motionless remained Red, looking down into his rival's battered features, illuminated by the still shining spotlight and the fainter dawn. For many minutes he remained thus, while the crews stood silent, waiting, and the day grew lighter. Finally he rose slowly, and looked around. His eyes, swollen to mere slits, took in the crews, captors and captives. He grinned and summoned his mate.

"You have your orders," he said.

NOT only had Buck been knocked out by Red; his head had struck the *Tropic's* deck as he fell, and he remained unconscious until long after sun-up. When he revived, he was conscious of a whisky taste. He looked up and saw Red pouring liquor down his throat. He was in his own cabin. He heard the *Tropic's* engines. He sat suddenly up in bed and looked around.

Through a port-hole he saw the *Old Purity* steaming abreast of the *Tropic*. A man approached the door and entered. He addressed Red, and Buck recognized the second mate of the *Old Purity*. With a hasty and furtive look he took in his cabin. His gear was gone, and in its place were Red's belongings. Understanding flashed in his eyes and he turned in rage, but sharp pain in his head caused him to fall back on the bed.

"Take it easy, Buck," said Red. "There ain't nothin' you can do.

"Buck," he went on, "you've tried and tried to get me, and you ain't never done it. Now I've got you.

"You tried at Nicaragua and you tried here, and you never done it. You've beat me sometimes, and I've beat you, but this time I'm beatin' you for keeps.

"Ain't goin' to be any more for you, Buck. All your gear's on the *Old Purity*; all your crew's on the *Old Purity*. And that three inch gun's on the *Tropic*, now, trained on the *Old Purity*. My crew and I're takin' the *Tropic*, now, and you're takin' the *Old Purity* in, 'cause I'm holdin' that gun on you till I see the Coast Guard ship.

"It's all over Buck. You're doin' time

like you said you would, down there in Colombia. And I'm takin' the *Tropic* like I said I would. So, Buck, you might as well take it easy here with me the rest of the day, 'cause tonight you're through, boy; you're clear through!"

And Buck knew it. Strangely enough, he remained silent. Red stayed with him and, when he grew stronger, took him to the saloon, where they broke open a bottle of whisky. Then, although he held his gun in readiness, Red talked to Buck, and it was not a one-sided conversation: Buck talked to Red. All day they sat, eating and drinking and talking, until, shortly after sunset, a man entered and told Red they were nearing Florida.

They arose, then, these enemies, and went out on deck. The ships stopped and a boat put out from the *Old Purity*. It was rowed to the *Tropic* and the accommodation ladder of that ship was let down. Buck descended, but he neither stormed nor swore; he walked slowly and painfully, like a somnambulist.

Red, standing above like the Kaiser in the famous cartoon, watched him. Step by step, step by step, he descended until he reached the bottom and dropped into the little boat. Then all was silent, save for the creak of the oars as Buck was rowed away from the *Tropic*. He looked back—once.

And Red Murdock, standing at the rail watching him, felt no thrill, no exultation of triumph. He stood as one in a trance, unaware of his actual thoughts. And, although he did not know it, his hard blue eyes were quite bright.

They were fixed on the lifeboat, which moved in slow and regular jerks across the water. And, as it reached the ladder the crew of the *Old Purity* had let down, Red turned and looked at the Florida coast. In the distance was the glow of Tampa. There he saw, jumping across the waves, a large launch—the Coast Guard cutter.

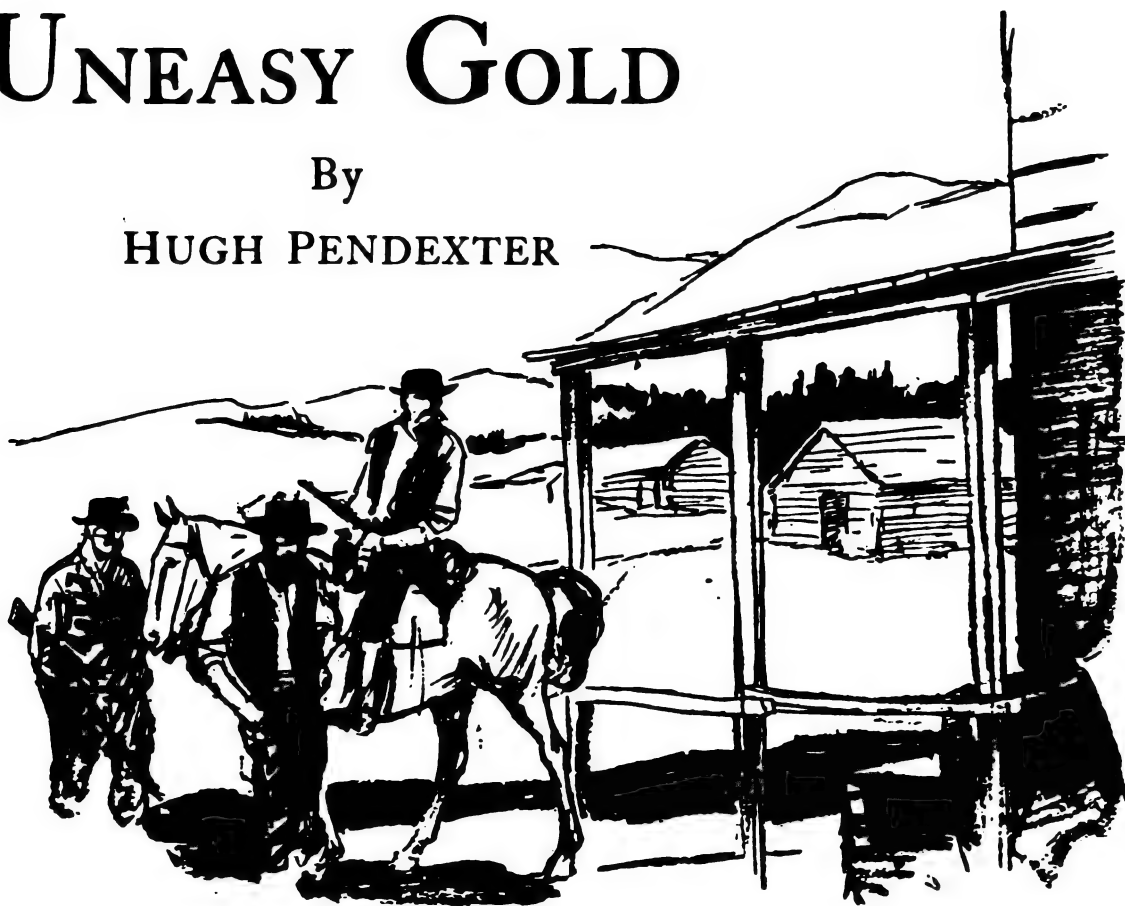
He looked back and saw Buck slowly ascending the ladder, and Red Murdock suddenly looked very old. His shoulders drooped. His whole body seemed to sag as he shouted in a strangely hoarse voice:

"Hey, Buck! When you get out, if you need any help—let me know."

Buck Knight did not look back, but he nodded. And Red Murdock stood amazed at his own words.

UNEASY GOLD

By
HUGH PENDEXTER



CHAPTER I

PLUMMER'S LEGACY

JIM REESE, mountain floater, and dangerously close to the boundary of respectability, left his horse on the outskirts of Rocker of a June morning and entered the town rather surreptitiously. That is, he moved along the backs of houses, stores, and saloons of the main street like one bent on theft. Nor did he relish the situation as he halted in the shelter of an abandoned log hut and reconnoitered the rear of the Capital Saloon, Captain Cram's whisky and gambling place. Reese was convinced that if ever a man had tossed away a fortune by pure idiocy he was that individual. He had had the fortune at the ends of his fingers and had euchred himself out of possession.

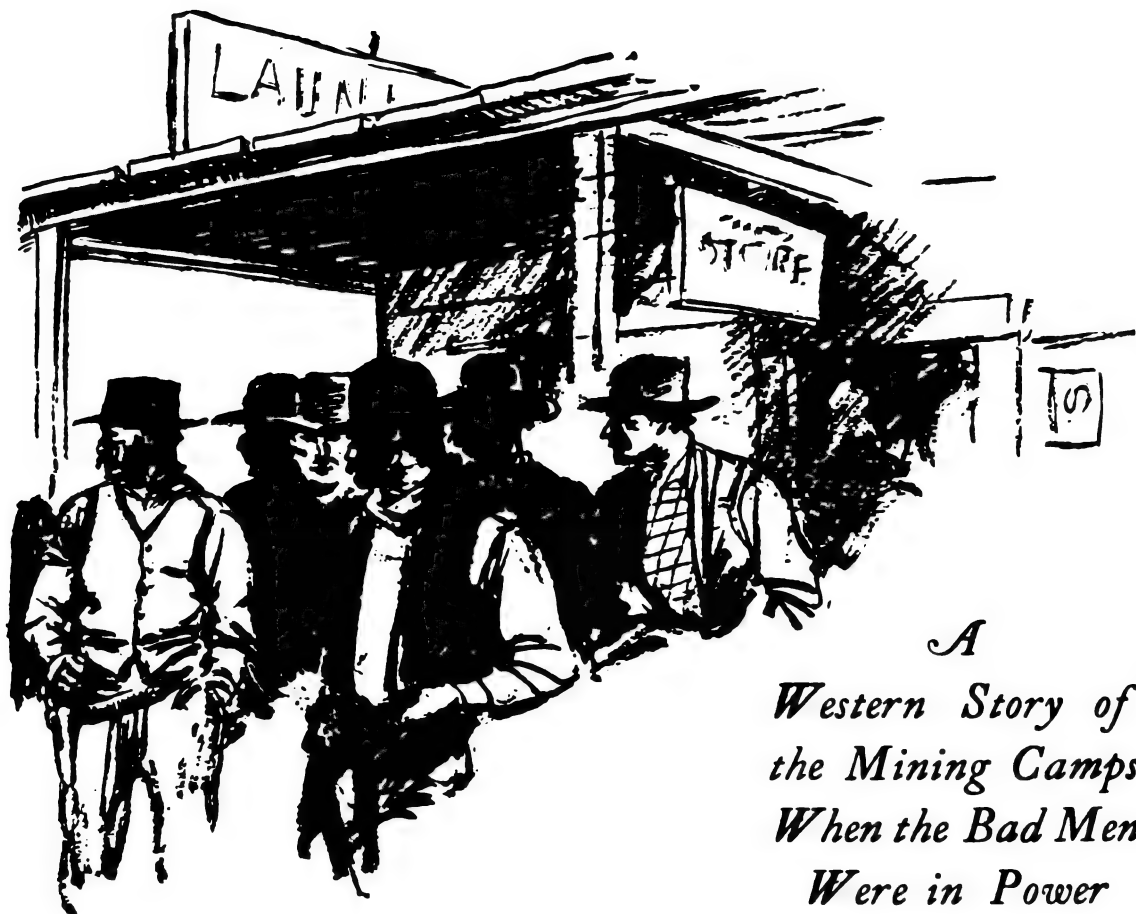
Staring at the windows in the back room for a minute he decided it held no occupants. Ducking his head low he ran rapidly to the rear door. The back room was empty, with the table and floor still littered with cards from the night's play. So far so good, Reese told himself as he gained the door opening into the saloon,

and with one hand on his gun, pulled it back a trifle and snatched a glimpse of the long bar. Fortune was favoring him at least to the extent of placing the proprietor and Doctor Kidd at the lower end of the bar, a dozen feet from him. The two were shaking dice for gold pieces. The bottle between them testified to morning drinks. At the upper end of the bar two barkeepers were serving a few customers.

Slouching his hat well forward and hooking a thumb in his belt Reese quickly opened the door and with three long strides was behind the two men just as Cram was lifting the box to roll the dice. Premonition of a hostile presence caused the captain to stay the cast while his shaggy head slowly turned. The box fell on the bar, a hand dropped to a gun, but Reese interposed Doctor Kidd's person as a shield, drew his gun, and softly warned:

"Don't, please. Just rest both poor, tired hands on the bar and listen to the medicine talk I've bothered to fetch you and Doctor Kidd."

Kidd, swarthy as a breed, but slim of figure and with a love for garish elegance, threw aces against the dice Cram had spilled, raked in the pot, and murmured,



*A
Western Story of
the Mining Camps
When the Bad Men
Were in Power*

"He brings you white wampum, Cap'n. Soft and easy."

Cram drew a deep breath, clasped his big, hairy hands on the bar, and fiercely demanded, "What you back here for? You know you're just pizen to me."

"I'm worse than that, Cap'n, if you act up unfriendly. I'm Old Man Death. This is the second and last time I've come here on business. We don't like each other, Cram, but business is business."

The captain's ire lessened a trifle because of curiosity.

"It's pestiferous the way you make calls on people, Reese," he growled. "I don't cotton to your way of captivat' an honest bar with a gun in your paw. A few days ago you come in the front door and shoved the muzzle of a gun ag'in my innards. It ain't neighborly an' I can't git to like it."

"I had to do it, Cap'n, to stop your man Bloover from drilling me. I must have this one talk with you. I want safe passage back to the street if my talk doesn't interest you."

"I won't lift a finger ag'in you. What's your business?" grunted Cram.

Reese belted his gun and explained, "Right after getting clear of you and Kidd

the other day I went to Silver Bow City to carry my talk to Logan. I want to hitch up with your outfit, or with Logan. Met Logan in the street and tried to dicker with him. He went for a gun, but I beat him to it——"

"You damned fool, you didn't go 'n' rub out that skunk, did you?" ferociously cried Cram.

"Gently, Cap'n, gently. Our young friend has some brains even if he did make a misplay when all he had to do was to throw his cards down, face up," whispered Doctor Kidd.

"Rub out Tiger Logan and kill upwards o' three hundred thousand dollars?" jeered Reese. "Do I look to be as big a fool as that?"

Cram breathed in deep relief. "Well, go on," he prompted. "So long as you didn't heap mortal trouble on Tiger Logan, damn him, I'll listen this time. But you admit you tried to make a deal with Tiger and freeze us boys out. That wasn't neighborly. Not by a long chalk."

Reese grinned good-naturedly and asked, "Could you expect me to keep on trying to play Santa Claus to an outfit that's always hankering to see the color of my blood?"

Yet I've come back to make one more try. After this, if you turn down my talk, I'll play a lone hand. Here's the situation: Neither I, nor any of your gang, can afford to kill Logan. But he's in the driver's seat and will be glad to kill all of us. I beat him to the draw, took his gun, tossed it back of a house and made off."

"Lucky for you that you didn't do him any hurt," savagely said Cram. "I'll slit the throat of the man who harms that skunk and thief."

Doctor Kidd chuckled and lazily remarked, "Birds of a feather calling each other names."

"Don't allow I'm a skunk, or a thief, even in fun, Kidd," warned Cram.

"I'm the one bird of different feathers," coldly reminded Reese. "I located the stuff. You and your outfit spied on me and treated me as something very precious. Logan was the one to learn my secret, did it right under your noses. Under my nose, too, he lifted the gold and skipped out. I went to him to offer to split it. I think he was foolish not to hear me. We all know he has the gold, and we're all pull-hauling and breaking our necks in trying to find out where he cached it."

"We have as much right to it as anyone," sullenly said Cram.

"If you can get it," agreed Reese. "I rather look on it as my gold. But it seems to be Logan's just now."

"There are no owners to the gold Henry Plummer saved from his stealings while acting as sheriff and chief of the road agents," put in Doctor Kidd. And his dark face flushed as he brooded over the blood-stained hoard of at least a quarter of a million. "I was at his hanging, when he tried to save his neck by offering to tell where the stuff was buried a hundred yards from a corner of the corral at Robbers' Roost out on the Virginia City road. Twice he offered to take the boys there and show them the spot. He told them they could cut him in pieces if they didn't find the gold; but they preferred to hang him. That left the gold the property of the man who could find it. You had the inside track and lost out."

"Like a dunderhead!" angrily denounced Cram, now tugging his black beard with both hands. "To think of almost getting your paws on it, and then losing! I'll never forgive you for letting Tiger Logan steal it

away. If you'd had it our work would 'a' been easier——"

"Of course, Cap'n," broke in Kidd. "But that's all gone by. Now we have a new deal. I know we shall be much interested to hear what Reese has to say."

Cram was more obtuse. He persisted in reminding, "But he had his chance, and then let Logan horn in and pouch it. Why should he have another chance?"

"Because we'd rather have him with us than against when we find it," quietly explained Doctor Kidd. "But once the hiding place is located we must send Logan over the ridge, or we'll have him against us. And he's bad, Cap'n, just bad."

Cram digested this, then grunted, and surrendered, "All right, Reese, make your talk."

REESE glanced about to make sure they had the end of the room to themselves and then began:

"If you folks hadn't horned in, Logan never would have won out. But you kept at my heels so close, and I was watching you so sharp, I didn't see what Logan was up to. Blame yourselves for losing out. But that's that. My offer is this. Let's play in together against Logan. We can afford to split the gold three ways if we fail to locate the cache. A third to him, a third to me, and a third to you, Cram, and your outfit."

Kidd's thin nose pinched in, and his eyes grew malevolent. Cram spoke for the two of them when he angrily demanded, "Why a third to you when you don't stand in as good as I and my men do?"

"By the right of discovery. If not for me Logan wouldn't have gotten it. If not for your bungling play Logan couldn't have gotten it. Either as I say, or I'll play a lone hand," Reese answered.

Cram's bearded lips parted in a wolfish snarl. Doctor Kidd was quick to say, "That's fair, Cap'n. If Logan will produce two thirds he can keep the other third."

Cram glared into Kidd's pale blue eyes for a moment, then understood. He sighed and complained, "Of course a third for men 'n' the Doctor and Cinders and Bloover ain't the pickings I'd counted on. But I'll go in. If Logan don't agree, then the pot will be divided in halves."

"In halves if we can out-Injun him and get our hands on it," said Reese. "But if

we try to force his hand someone's going to get badly killed. And if Logan's killed his secret dies with him."

"Perhaps not," murmured Kidd. "He has a woman living with him."

"I won't stand for abusing any woman," said Reese.

The doctor smiled faintly, and countered, "Who's talking about abusing a woman. She might fall in love with me and marry me; and I might learn the secret from her."

Instantly Cram was suspicious. He coldly warned, "Be careful, Kidd. Be very careful. I'd hate to be in your boots if I knew a mighty big gold secret, and had a sneaking notion of keeping that secret from my old pards."

"I'm not fool enough to try cold-decking you, Cap'n," assured Kidd.

"We're off the trail," Reese impatiently reminded. "We must make Logan understand he's in for a run of hard luck if he tries to get away with all the gold. We must watch his every move so he can't sneak off with the stuff. We must make him understand he'll never be rid of our spies until he shells out. He'd be a fool to share up until forced to."

"You don't opine it's in his shack out on the Silver City road," hoarsely whispered Cram.

"Not being a born idiot, I do not," promptly said Reese. "Nor do I believe it's buried anywhere near the shack—Who knows that a woman's living with him?"

"Blover see a petticoat going into his shack. Bloover, Cinders and the doctor take turns watching the Tiger," Cram explained.

Reese frowned, and frankly admitted, "I don't like your way of doing business, Cap'n. What if Bloover, or Cinders, discovered where it's cached? Would they gallop here and kill a horse to fetch you the good news? Or would they forget you and ride over the mountains—I'm leaving out the doctor. I know he's honest."

Kidd smiled grimly in appreciation of this bit of irony. Cram took alarm and savagely vowed, "If I believed either of them two scuts would try that game on me I'd cut their throats."

"But you don't believe it, Cap'n," said Kidd. "Gold makes men mighty suspicious. Bloover and Cinders might be silly enough to feel uneasy if they knew you had learned the secret. We'll all feel bet-

ter if we keep all the cards on the table, face up. None of us who wouldn't lift the whole pot if he thought he wouldn't get caught. But none of us dares to take that chance."

"I feel that way, or I'd never come here today," said Reese. "I might play a lone hand against Logan, and win. Then I'd have you people to fight. Now I'll sneak into Silver Bow, get the drop on Logan, and make him listen to my talk."

"You won't have to do any sneaking," Doctor Kidd quickly corrected. "The Democratic convention is on in Silver Bow, and the town's crowded. Small chance of the Tiger spotting you."

"Who's on watch over there now?" asked Reese.

"Cinders is there today. I'll send word for him keep off while you make your play," said Cram. Then, suspiciously, "But what'll you do if he laughs at you? Steal his woman?"

"No women in this game. If he refuses my offer then all of you must come and camp down in Silver Bow. Then no man will be tempted to get away with the gold if he happens to find it. We'll watch Logan, nab him, carry him into the hills and hold him prisoner while we prospect around his shack. Probably the stuff is hidden several miles from town. If we fail to find it we'll let him escape and lie low and dog him till he leads us to it. Start the word ahead so Cinders won't block my game and I'll be off."

"Just remember I'll do the planning for my outfit," warned Cram. "You talk too much like a big chief. Word starts at once to Cinders."

When Reese left the saloon it was with a full realization of the peril he was in. He knew Cram and his associates would turn on him once the gold was found. He knew he had effected only a temporary truce. And that was all he had hoped to achieve.

EVER since January 10, 1864, when Plummer was hanged at Bannack, there had been hot speculation as to where the bandit chief had concealed his share of much stolen gold. He had not spent it, nor sent it from the country. When the noose was about to settle around his neck he played his last card: a frantic offer to reveal his hidden hoard if the vigilantes would release him. This much was com-

mon knowledge. After his death there had been much surreptitious searching. Reese had located the plunder close to the corral instead of a hundred yards away. The discovery was a blind bit of luck and Reese had not dared to dig it up for fear of the Cram outfit. While quietly securing pack-animals and waiting for a dark night, Tiger Logan, fearless, and a lover of gun play, had stepped in and carried off the treasure.

While Rocker, five miles below Butte, was very active, it remained for Silver Bow City, a vestibule to Butte, to rival the latter town in excitement at the time Reese arrived and stabled his horse, and mingled with the milling crowds. Not only were the placers of the town paying high, but the influx of delegates to the convention were making the Eagle scream. Business men were most prosperous, and were sending for more goods to Virginia City, a hundred miles away, by William Vernon's pony express. By the same medium proprietors of hurdy-gurdies, gambling bells, and whisky stores sent rush orders for more dance-hall girls, more liquor, and additional gambling paraphernalia.

Reese found more than a thousand men thronging the place, seeking profit and pleasure, adventure and political honors. Gold circulated lavishly at eighteen dollars to the ounce. Nor did it seem there could be any end of the precious metal when one heard the hourly reports spreading along the streets. A load of gravel, sold for two hundred dollars, had yielded a hundred thousand. Placers throughout the diggings were paying as high as a thousand dollars a day.

As Reese dropped into a saloon to get his bearings and plan for his interview with Logan, his ears were pounded by repeated boasts and hyperbolic assertions and his gaze was distracted by the endless slamming and dumping of heavy pouches on the bar. Bartenders, weighing out dust for rounds of drinks, were making rare side money from the precious specks that fell on the square of plush under the scales. Reese had witnessed similar scenes, but never had he sensed such intensity of optimism. He could almost believe that any minute the last doors to nature's treasure house would be forced and incalculable gold uncovered. He drank his beer and wondered if he was not wasting time in essay-

ing to recover Plummer's bloody stealings. Seemingly, there was gold everywhere—honest gold, just for the taking.

The man at his elbow bellowed at him, "Diedrich Brothers just washed out a eighteen hundred dollar chunk!"

A man on the other side of him shouted, "Eighteen hundred hell! Bob McMinn just found a six hundred pound quartz rock that's lousy with gold. By tomorrer he'll find the lead from where the float came. That means a *mountain* of gold!"

"Judas Jerusalem!" howled another. "I reckon all this northwest country's pure gold if you can git down deep enough!"

Reese envied McMinn. Could he have looked ahead two years he would have seen Bob gleefully selling a claim in the McMinnville Bar district for two hundred dollars which held a thousand times the selling price. Reese also was puzzled to understand why men should squabble for political preferment when mud-splashed men were daily winning fortunes from the ground. Again he wondered why he bothered to hunt for a robber's loot with the placers paying so richly.

"If I'd worked as hard to find a paying claim as I have in hunting for—" He broke off abruptly on discovering that he was talking aloud. He finished his beer and made for the street.

As he reached the doorway a man galloped madly by the saloon.

"That's too dangerous even for a drunk to do," he wrathfully exclaimed.

"Feller's in a hurry from just killin' a man," lazily explained a camp bummer. "Tiger's gun got caught 'n' he drilled him."

Grabbing the derelict by the shoulder Reese shook him and fiercely demanded, "Tiger? Tiger who?"

"You don't have to bust my arm, pard. I was saying that Tiger Logan's gun caught for a second as he made for to draw it. Then he got his."

"How badly is he wounded?" gasped Reese.

"Must be a relation of your'n. Wounded? Tiger's gone over the divide. T'other feller blew hell out of him."

Reese leaned limply against the side of the saloon. Fate, a dirty trickster, had erased the great secret, had killed the man Reese would have risked his life to shield.

FUNERALS quickly follow deaths in the gold country, and Tiger Logan and his ruthless record were almost forgotten inside of twenty-four hours after the burial. Reese had waited until the grave was filled and then walked his horse through the excited, gesticulating groups, and heard bits of "discovery" hysteria and fag ends of political axioms. But his mind was on the work ahead. Did Logan's woman know? If she held the secret would she trade. He halted at Collins' store and was told by a busy clerk:

"You can't miss the shack. Probably no one there now. Sets back under some willows and there's lots of flowers planted around it."

He continued his quest for a quarter of a mile and dismounted on coming abreast of the cabin. The flowers proclaimed it to be the right one. There were patches of petunias and marigolds, and angel's breath, and fragrant mignonette, sweet-williams, and pert pansies. He hitched his horse to a drooping willow and advanced toward the log house. His head was bowed and he was contemplating life's vicissitudes. Had he not paused to drink a beer Logan would be alive and he would have performed his errand. Even if the woman knew the secret, and he dared not to expect that much, she might refuse to tell. And he could not wage war on a woman. Cram could, and that would mean open war with Cram.

A rasping sound caused him to jerk up his head. Between the white curtains of an open window had appeared the barrel of a big revolver. He decided it was a .45, and he mechanically raised his hands above his head.

A shrill voice demanded, "Who are you, and what do you want here?"

He swept off his hat and explained, "I came to town to have a business talk with Mr. Logan and learned he had passed away. Just rode down to see where he lived."

"Sheriff from outside I take it. Well, you can ride back."

"I'm no officer of the law, ma'am. I met Mr. Logan once and he impressed me as being a strong, forceful sort of a man. I had a business deal to propose. Can't I talk a bit with you? There's no need of keeping me covered. I'm harmless."

The gun barrel wavered, then was slowly withdrawn. The door opened and Reese

was amazed to behold a young woman, dainty and beautiful. The handsome head was covered with a mass of chestnut curls. She was entirely different from the type he had expected to behold; for Tiger Logan was not one to charm the ladies.

While he gaped she quickly came close to him and tilted back her head and demanded, "You wanted to see my father about what?"

"You're — Mr. Logan's daughter?" mumbled Reese. Even as he was asking the needless question he was discovering a resemblance in the steady blue eyes.

"I am Annie Logan, his daughter," and the shapely head tilted defiantly. "And he was a good pap to me, no matter what the scum say about him."

"I have nothing ill to say about him," said Reese. "And scum kept its mouth shut while he was alive. I came to make a business offer."

"Pap wasn't interested in business."

Reese studied the sad young face for a moment and wondered how he could develop the nature of his errand. He began by asking, "Did you ever hear of Cap'n Cram?"

The girl's features instantly expressed strong emotion. "Hear of him!" she bitterly cried. "If he stood before me, in place of you, a stranger, I'd shoot him dead for a brutal, cowardly murderer."

Reese stared in amazement.

"See here, miss," he feebly began, "Cram isn't as good a man as he should be. But murder? That's a strong word. Who has he murdered?"

She turned and inclined her head toward a mound beyond the end of the cabin and whispered, "Pap."

"Oh, you're mistaken, Miss Logan," eagerly insisted Reese. "I left Cram in Rocker yesterday morning. Your father was killed almost as soon as I reached this town. He couldn't have gotten here ahead of me. Believe me or not, but I tell you Cram will be powerfully sorry when he hears your father is dead. I can prove absolutely——"

"Come along! I never said Cram fired the death shot. I say he killed my pap. He killed him through one of his cut-throats. A man called Cinders."

Reese did not speak for a few moments. Then he said, "If Cinders is guilty then no one will be quicker to resent it than Cram."

Cram isn't any angel, but your father had a secret that was worth more'n a quarter of a million. Cram would never rub out the holder of that secret."

She nodded slowly and understandingly, and muttered, "Plummer's gold. Well, I always told pap no good would come of it. You can sit down while we talk. You've got to explain things. My pap was masterful, hard-riding, quick-shooting, but he was good to me. Now, how do you get mixed up in this hidden gold business?"

"I'm the man who located Plummer's gold. Your father spied on me. He removed it while I was planning to do so."

She dropped on the grass and scrutinized him sharply. She did not seem to be greatly surprised by his words. "You found it, and he got it?" she asked.

"Yes."

"You found it buried and left it buried?"

"Yes."

"And he took it from the ground where it was cached? And before you'd put your hands on it?"

Reese nodded.

She went on, "Then he didn't steal anything from you."

"I won't put it that strong to his daughter," said Reese.

Her eyes flashed, and she warned, "You'd better not put it that way to anyone so I'll hear of it. Now what did you think to say to pap?"

Reese briefly repeated the offer he would have made had he found Logan alive.

The girl nodded and said, "Cinders, the killer, was sent here by Cram. Cram's responsible for his acts. Pap 'n' me knew he was watching us. When it wasn't him it was another man."

"He'll have a sad time explaining to Cap'n Cram," said Reese.

"Which won't fetch my pap back to life. Now you listen to me and give my words to Cram and his gang. That gold never belonged to you, or anyone of them. It belonged to no one except the first to lay hands on it. There's a curse on it. It can never be given back to the relations of the poor, dead men, who were murdered because they had it. It brought death to my pap. If you could have it now it would bring death to you."

Reese plucked at the wild grass as she talked. When she finished he shot in, "You know where it's hidden?"

"Yes. I do," the girl promptly replied.

He surveyed the tumult of chestnut curls, the blue eyes, the entire daintiness of her small person, and earnestly said, "Miss Logan, never admit as much to anyone else in the world, unless you are ready to do what I would have asked your father to do."

"You mean Cram would kill me?"

"He never would allow anything, or anyone stand between him and the finding of that gold."

"And you'd help him!" she jeered. "And you'd like to have me trust you, and tell you. Then there would be three thirds, all for you."

He could feel his face burning. He discovered he was wishing for her good opinion.

"No," he quietly told her. "I'd make a play to shut Cram out, just as he would try for all of it. But I would give you a third and keep my mouth shut until you had had time to leave the territory, or turn it over to the express company."

"You talk well," she bitterly admitted. "But I trust no one who rides with the Cram outfit. If Cram comes to me I'll send him away right sharp. And I think that ends your business here."

She rose and smoothed out her skirts and turned to enter the house.

"Just half a minute," he begged, "then I'll trouble you no more. Don't tell Cram that you know where it's hidden. I shall tell him your father carried the secret with him."

"Still making a play for all of it, eh?" she taunted. "Cram will know what I'll tell him when he hears me talk." At the door she paused to say, "I've got my pap's guns. I can use them. That goes for you as well as for the Cram outfit."

"I'm more afraid of your tongue than of the guns," he bitterly retorted.

The door slammed behind her and he hurried to his horse. He rode slowly up the road. Logan's death had a disquieting effect. It was tragic, he believed, that the girl should take her father's place in the grim game. He still insisted the gold was his by right of discovery. Despite his hesitance to say as much to the girl, he considered Logan to have acted the thief, reaping where he had not sown. But fighting Tiger Logan was vastly different from fighting Annie Logan. He wished she had not

shared in the secret. He was tremendously thankful that he had not fought it out with Logan and left the girl an orphan. Cram was absolutely without a conscience; as were Kidd and the others.

"This is a pretty mess," a familiar voice broke in on his gloomy meditations. He jerked his head about and beheld Kidd standing by the road at the end of Collin's store.

Reese started to dismount, but Doctor Kidd quickly stayed him, saying, "Ride on. Meet you in the back room of the Pilgrim's Rest. It's a bad business."

CHAPTER II

HEIRS AT ODDS

THE influx of strangers to Silver Bow permitted the gathering in the back room of the saloon to pass unnoticed. Groups of politicians and would-be office-holders were busily plotting and scheming in every public resort. Even the hurdy-gurdies had schemers who were oblivious of the dancing and the music. When Reese and Doctor Kidd entered the rear room, Reese, who was in the lead, found himself held up by a swarthy-faced man, a stranger to him. Doctor Kidd called out:

"All right, Benito. He's sound." Then to Reese as the door closed behind them, "This is a friend of Cap'n Cram's. Just blew in from the south. He runs with us."

Reese nodded without glancing a second time at the new recruit. Captain Cram's shaggy head was more disheveled than usual, and a baleful glint in his eyes proclaimed a terrible rage. The sight of Reese seemed to set him off on a violent tangent. In a voice that rocked and trembled with poorly suppressed anger he began a terrible tirade against Cinders, who was lowering from a corner, with one hand on his hip close to his gun.

"Damn you!" gritted Cram, swinging about to face Cinders. "You killed two men when you rubbed the Tiger out." The long knife flashed from his belt and he stood before the frightened ruffian ready to thrust. Cinders, with his hand now resting on his gun, made no move in self-defense. His mouth opened and closed spasmodically, but he said nothing. Reese remained rigid, unable to move a muscle as he watched for the knife to be lunged

forward. Doctor Kidd glided in front of the captain and clasped his wrist with fingers of steel. In a low voice he told his leader:

"Before you start killing folks suppose you find out how much this man knows. If he had learned the Tiger's secret I can understand his reason for potting him."

The captain's feral gaze slowly shifted to stare at the hand enclosing his hairy wrist. He stepped back and disengaged Kidd's grasp and restored the knife to the belt. Kidd told the cowering wretch in the corner, "I've saved your hide for the minute. Now give us a straight talk."

"Doctor Kidd, Cap'n Cram, 'n' Bloover, wish I'll be struck dead in my boots if I know anything more about that gold than you folks do," gasped Cinders. He furtively raised a hand to mop the sweat from his low forehead.

"Then you're a worse fool than I'd believed," harshly said Bloover.

Glancing around the ferocious half circle Cinders lost his nerve entirely and babbled, "I wa'n't gunnin' for him! But t'was him or me. I'd been down by his shack, keeping watch from a hut farther down the road. When I come to town for some grub 'n' a drink he must 'a' trailed me. First thing I know he was standing close by me and had grabbed my left arm 'n' was cussin' me to beat all natur'. Then he said I was a damn spy, and that he was bound to cash my chips for me. He started to draw a gun, I doing the same, for it was life or death with a second for the toss-up. The hammer of his gun caught in his shirt and I fetched out my iron 'n' bored him. 'T was him or me, boss. You'd 'a' done the same."

"From what I've gathered from town talk, Cap'n, that's about how it happened," said Kidd. "They are not blaming Cinders. Plain self-defense. But damn expensive for us. He just did the best he knew how, only he didn't know enough."

"He killed a man who knows where a immortal fortune is hid!" hissed Cram. "All he had to do was to bend a gun over the Tiger's head and ride to Rocker and report to me. And the poor, mis'erable fool killed three hundred thousand dollars!"

Bloover sucked in his breath with a hissing sound. Even Kidd, usually so successful in concealing his feelings, revealed the tigrine quality of his condemnation by his

blazing gaze. Benito, the new man, eagerly urged, "Cut his weazen!"

This invited Cram's wrath. He told Benito, "Keep your yap shut. I'm running this show . . . Cinders, I'm going to let you keep on living for a spell . . . Reese, what have you learned?"

The tension relaxed, and Cinders slumped down to the floor and mopped his wet forehead, while the other men found stools and eagerly waited. Reese repeated a portion of his talk with Annie Logan. In concluding he said, "She can take the third her father would have taken had he lived and agreed to trade."

Cram eyed him craftily and remarked, "So she does know where the gold's hid?"

"No. She does not," promptly answered Reese.

"Then how in Tophet does she come in for any third?" wrathfully asked Cram.

"It would be a damn shame. Just wastin' of it," protested Cinders.

"You keep shut. Don't call attention to yourself," warned Cram. "Well, Reese?"

"Although her father kept his secret to himself," began Reese, "the young lady has eyes. She's smart. She must have an idea, in a general way, where to look. If she'll help us to find the stuff we can afford to give her a third."

"We can't afford to give her a dollar unless we have to," brusquely said Cram. Then with sudden suspicion, "But how do we know but what she told you where it is?"

Reese laughed, and countered, "Would I be here, chinning with you folks, if I knew? The girl told me nothing of interest except to promise to shoot if I didn't make myself scarce. Say we find the gold and refuse to give her any. What's to stop her from having a big mob trailing us? Getting it away from Tiger Logan is different from taking it away from the girl. And you folks seem to forget that I'm the man who found the gold at the start. Cram, you must quit thinking of the gold as being your personal property. Even your men won't stand for that. The Tiger and all of you horned in on my game. I'm willing to split. It's the price I pay for the fool way I let the stuff slide through my hands."

"I reckon you wouldn't be here if she'd told you," slowly said Cram.

"Yes he would," crisply corrected Doctor Kidd. "He's got brains. He'd come to us if

he knew just where it's hidden. For the good reason he hasn't had time to remove it."

"Think what you want to, all of you, but I know no more about the hiding place than does any man in this room," carelessly said Reese.

"I don't say that you do know," said Kidd. "I simply opine you'd be here if you did know. And that you'd run with us on false trails until you found a chance to get away with it. But I don't believe you've had time to learn anything. We'll drop that . . . How does the girl feel about her father's death?"

"She feels venomous."

"Does she know who potted him?" eagerly asked Cram. .

"She knows Cinders did it, and that he's one of your outfit. She holds you responsible for anything anyone of your outfit does."

Cram glared at Cinders and said, "Now, see what you've done! You low-down, mis'erable bungler!"

"Softly, softly, Cap'n," soothed Kidd. "Even a Democratic convention can't keep your bull-like voice from being heard . . . Now I think this should be our next play. Reese will see the girl, play sweet on her, and get her to tell if she knows where the gold is cached. The rest of us must keep low in some snug place within easy striking distance of her cabin."

"The hut down the road beyond her place will be prime for that," eagerly offered Cram.

"We'll look it over tonight," said Kidd. Then to Reese, "And you'll be ready to work on the girl and learn just how much she does know?"

Reese's gorge rose, but a swift glance at the vulpine faces made him cautious. "Yes, I'll see her again, of course," he said. "She promised to shoot any of you who comes near her cabin, and she has the Tiger's gun. She may shoot me. However, I've been there once and got away and I'll try again."

Doctor Kidd laughed mirthlessly, and announced, "If you fail, I'll try. And remember, Reese, there's no more chance for you to run for it than there is for Cinders to win the young lady's love. You'll be watched. I don't believe you know where the gold is, but I do believe you can find out. You're likely looking and can win a woman's confidence——"

"Shut up, Kidd!" broke in Reese. "All I want is some of the gold. By rights, it's all mine. I worked hard and used my head. And I located it. I'd rather have part of it than none of it. You folks don't trust me, and you won't trust each other. I trust none of you. But you can't euchre me out of the game. The young woman will shoot Cinders on sight. He'd better keep camp, stay in the background."

"All this beating 'round the bush gits us nowhere," spoke up Cinders, his fear of a summary vengeance emboldening him. "I say we must take a short cut 'n' stop fooling 'round. Steal the girl, take her into the hills and make her tell. We can't hang 'round this town only about so long without folks gitting curious. Who knows but what the girl may clear out any time? If she does that, how can we stop her? Hold up the stage? Of course not."

"Get this right before you overplay your hand and fetch a vigilance committee down on you," warned Reese: "The Logan girl knows nothing about the gold except that her father got some, somewhere."

Doctor Kidd smiled enigmatically, and said, "You must have had quite a cosey talk with her to learn so much about her. She must have changed her mind about shooting you. You try her again, Reese, and learn more. One of the men will watch her shack tonight, to see she doesn't mizzle before morning. Reese can do most of the watching daytimes."

Cram suddenly decided Kidd was forgetting who was chief of the band. He hotly reminded, "Just remember who's running this outfit, Kidd."

"All right. Give your orders," said Kidd.

"You took the words out of my mouth, that's all. I'll name a man to stand watch tonight. Rest of us will keep a general eye open. I'm thinking Cinders' notion of carrying her into the hills should be kept in mind. He made a terrible botch of his job, but taking the girl away ain't no slouch of a plan. If she don't know, or if she knows and won't tell, it'll be well to have her out of the way so we can search her cabin 'n' the ground 'round it. If it comes to runnin' her into the hills Reese can give out word she's left town. Reese better not seem to know us. He can stop right here at the Rest. Town's so upside down with gold fever 'n' politics no one will have much time to be curious."

Doctor Kidd received this show of authority with a smile. Reese agreed it was best he should not appear to know any of the five men, and passed out the back door. He knew his status had changed now that there was no Tiger Logan to dicker with. Cinders' plan, indorsed by Cram, worried him much. He feared lest it be put into operation that night. Kidd's subtle mind must have realized the danger of suspicion being directed against the outfit once the convention ended and the citizens took time to make note of the five idlers. As a result of these cogitations Reese decided to visit the Logan cabin and warn the girl to be on her guard.

Crossing the street he plunged in between the buildings to the next street and walked rapidly down the road, passing a string of log houses. There was scarcely any sign of life in this street as all Silver Bow City was congregated on the main thoroughfare, talking gold, talking politics, and seeking diversion in the various resorts.

REESE hurried on until a light told him he was abreast of the rear end of the Logan cabin. His problem was to secure the girl's attention without inviting a bullet. A few willows and patches of wild grass afforded the only cover as he quit the road and slowly made his way toward the light. There was no moon, but the stars burned like planets. When close to the cabin a clattering of hoofs in the road caused him to drop in the grass. He made out several horsemen, and he knew Cram and his men were moving down to the old hut a quarter of a mile below the Logan place. The little cavalcade slowed down to a walk and two horsemen halted. A deep voice, commanding them to ride on, Reese identified as Cram's. He had drawn his gun, fearing they had decided to abduct the girl that very night.

Waiting until satisfied the horsemen were really on their way Reese ran swiftly to the house and stood against the logs close to a window. Before he could make a signal Annie Logan was sharply demanding:

"What skulker's out there? I heard you. Speak up, or I'll shoot."

"It's Jim Reese. I've something important to tell you. Open the window a bit so I can talk."

After a few moments the girl lifted the window and extinguished the light.

"Come along," she whispered softly.

He stepped to the window and waited a bit for her to speak, and then asked, "Are you there, Miss Logan?"

A slight noise behind him caused him to whirl about. The muzzle of one of Tiger Logan's .45's was digging hard into his side; and Logan's daughter was fiercely demanding:

"How dare you come here like this?"

"To do you a good turn," murmured Reese. "There's a gun in my belt. Take it, and then let's talk."

He felt the gun leave his belt. The girl stepped back a pace and ordered, "Squat. Be mighty smart in explaining."

"I came to warn you to leave this place at once," he began. She interrupted with a derisive little laugh. He went on, "You must ride into Butte. Ride anywhere. But don't stay here."

"Now just what game are you trying to play?" she murmured.

"Believe it, or not, but I only want to know you are safe. Five men just rode down the road to put up in an empty shack below. They believe you know where your father cached the dust. I told them you didn't know. They may take a notion to run you into the hills and hold you there until you tell them."

"They *may* take a notion," she scornfully repeated.

"They've decided to do that," he impatiently told her.

"You're sure it isn't your notion to scare me from my home so's you can ransack the place?"

"You will believe that if you want to. But they'll carry you into the hills before anyone searches this place."

"I understand," she dryly said. "If I run away you can go back and tell the skunks the dust isn't here. If I refuse, that shows it's here, and they will try something else."

He was exasperated. He insisted, "I am trying to do you a good turn, but you make it a hard job. At least go to some friend up the street and arrange to stay there nights. They'll scarcely dare risk running you off in the daytime."

"And leave this place unguarded nights for you and your friends to search? I have no friends in Silver Bow. My pap was scary of friends. I've lived alone and done my own thinking. I think you're a crook

along with the rest of them. I'm sticking here. No. Not a word . . . I'm going inside. At the door I'll toss your gun back. Get out, and stay out."

She rose and edged backward to the door. Baffled and angered that his motives should be so misjudged Reese glumly waited until the gun fell at his feet. Securing the weapon he made direct for the main street and turned toward the town. As he strode along, nursing his chagrin, and condemning the obtuseness of all chestnut-haired young women he suddenly sensed danger. The monitor in his mind had sounded a warning. He slowed his pace and tilted his head in an attitude of listening. He had had premonitions of danger before, but there seemed no reason for this sudden, uneasy feeling. No one knew he had visited the cabin. A footpad could do better in the crowded, boisterous town. With his head half-turned and endeavoring to walk less noisily, he kept on. There came a soft *swish* in the grass at the side of the road, a sound so low as to be scarcely audible. He suddenly faced about and squatted on his heels and was rewarded by discerning a blob of something against the sky line.

"Man's head," he mechanically decided as he drew his gun and waited. The head vanished almost instantly. Half a minute passed, when a slight noise in the grass on the other side of the road caused him to face in that direction. Instantly he was attacked by a flying figure which leaped upon him like a gigantic frog.

As he went on his back under the impact of the assault he wondered he have been deceived by the second : caused by a rock, or stick, hurled across road. His assailant was a heavy man grunted as he stabbed downward. Reese felt the blade against his neck as it sank into the ground. Bringing up his right hand he fired blindly at the figure weighing him down. He felt the spasmodic jerk which told the assassin was hit; and with a mighty effort he rolled clear and advanced his gun for a second shot. But the blur on the grass remained motionless. Leaping to his feet Reese ran rapidly up the road and dodged behind the first building, a store. He halted and took advantage of the light streaming from a rear window to brush the dirt from his clothes and otherwise remove all traces of the encounter. Then he reloaded the empty chamber.

Continuing behind the buildings until he reached Collins' store he boldly made for the street and crossed to the Pilgrim's Rest and joined the long line at the bar and called for a beer. In the light of the long room he surveyed his person more carefully and furtively brushed away specks of road dirt. All the time his mind was in a tumult of speculation. He was forced to conclude he was unknown to his assailant and that the man was a footpad trying his luck where he could find a victim.

HE WAS finishing his beer when in the mirror he beheld Doctor Kidd, slim and dapper, standing close behind him. The dark face was blank as a mask but the man could not deaden the light in his eyes. He breasted the bar beside Reese and with a smile and a flash of his white teeth seized Reese's hand and pressed it warmly. For a second or two the long fingers rested on Reese's wrist. Then he was saying:

"Your pulse is racing? What's happened?"

"Happened? One beer has happened. What do you mean?"

"Probably you've been hurrying. I hunted for you after you quit the back room, but you were gone."

"If it interests you I'll say I stepped outside for a bit. I was close by when you five rode off down the road. Now I am here. What's the meaning of the pulse, and guessing that I've been hurrying?"

"Oh, not an awful lot," carelessly replied Kidd. "You been here long enough to drink one beer." With a quick flirt of his hand he drew Reese's gun, and raised the muzzle to his nose and took a sniff before Reese could move to secure the weapon. Then he was handing it back, saying, "A good gun."

"Damn you, Kidd! Never try that again," warned Reese wrathfully. "I've got six loads of certain death in that gun." And his hand closed over the handle.

"I noticed it was fully loaded. But it's been fired within the last thirty minutes."

"Well, of all the nosey, prying around!"

"No, no, Reese. You might fool Cram, but not me," softly said Kidd. "Your pulse is galloping. You've just come from outside. You shot at something. I was down the road and heard the shot. It was between me and the town."

"Anything else?" Reese asked coldly.

"Not much . . . By the way; the man you killed down the road was Benito."

Reese watched the doctor's face in the mirror as he asked, "You found his knife?"

"Yes. Buried almost to the hilt in the dirt."

"Of course he never did that after he was hit," reminded Reese.

"That's better, Reese. Much better. I simply want an understanding between you and me. It was Cram's idea of fetching Benito into the outfit; and we all know too many are in it now. You have fighting guts. You're bright. Cinders and Bloover are so many fools. Not more than ten years old from the nose up. We two could go far if we could trust each other and work together."

"I'm as trustful as a little child," said Reese. "Deal."

Kidd's lips twitched and showed his teeth.

"Anyway," he said, "you've got head enough to know it'll take two good men to get away with Plummer's loot. You tried it by yourself once, and failed."

"But Logan got away with it alone," Reese reminded.

"Because you weren't looking for him to cut in on your play. And see how Logan fared. Killed in his tracks by that imbecile Cinders."

"Have a drink and be frank and noble," urged Reese.

After two beers were served Kidd further confided, "I don't know why Benito jumped you. I don't care. I'm glad you rubbed him out. Cram planned to have him along when he jumped with the gold. The rest of us were to be dished. Cram would ring in a cold deck on his grandmother when it comes to bagging dust. Now I'm thinking that you and I can cold-deck Cram and split the loot. What say?"

"An even split would be generous of me," mused Reese. Then suddenly, "But what if I should tell Cram of your offer?"

Kidd laughed softly and replied, "I'd say you were trying to set two old friends against each other. Not that Cap'n Cram trusts any man on earth when it comes to raking in a fat pot."

Reese pushed back his hat and confessed, "You interest me. But before we get down to bargaining, please tell me why you think you'd be better off to throw in with me?"

"I stumbled over Benito's body beside the road. It was nearer the Logan cabin than to the town. I knew at once you had been down to talk with the girl. You weren't up here; you must be down there. Benito killed and several ounces of dust were in his pockets. Yes, I took the dust so it would look like a thief's work. Take me in on the deal and we'll split it three ways, if you really meant what you said about the girl having a share."

"You were holding out for a fifty-fifty divvy," Reese reminded.

"Of course I want it that way. The girl is entitled to nothing."

"Kidd, the girl hasn't the remotest idea where her father cached that dust," earnestly lied Reese.

"And yet you risk a night visit to her! Reese, you're playing with me. It's not a good game. I've weathered lots of trouble in lots of places."

"Kidd, if you knew where that stuff is you'd haul out without ever stopping to kiss any of us good-by. If I knew, I should be riding continuous," said Reese. "Now I'll do this. I'll help block Cram, Cinders, and Bloover. When it comes to a showdown it will be my pot, or yours. Winner take all. Is that worth playing for?"

"That's handsome enough," heartily agreed Kidd. "The two of us against the world until the discovery is actually made . . . And by the way, I dragged Benito closer to town. We'll let Cram believe he was killed in a street fight."

"Thanks. But I reckon Cram would approve of the truth. Benito must have lost his head. Cram would never want me rubbed out if he thought I knew the secret, or stood a chance of learning it. I'm rather precious to Cap'n Cram."

Kidd gripped the bar with both hands. His dark face worked into and out of an animal snarl.

"By God, I wonder if Cram's on the true trail and thinks to thin out those interested!"

Reese had not gone as far as this in his reasoning, and Kidd's deduction hit him like a blow.

Kidd continued, "So long as there was a chance of you discovering the hiding place you'd be precious to all of us. Now Benito never lost his head. He's fiery, but he obeys orders. Rode with Cram two years ago. I'm afraid, Reese, you're a

marked man. I'm afraid the Cap'n has found a clue."

"But where, how, when?" challenged Reese. "This evening, in here, he knew nothing. You've been with him ever since."

"Benito must have stumbled onto something while scouting around the Logan house . . . Reese, he must have overheard something. . . . You must have talked with the girl and he overheard that talk. . . Reese, if I believed you already know the truth I'd——"

"No, no, Doctor Kidd. Nothing violent. If you believed that you'd cherish me dearly and try to cut my throat once you'd hit the right trail. Cap'n Cram's the lad you should watch. Not me."

CHAPTER III

THE COLD DECK

AFTER Benito's body had been buried in an unmarked grave Cram called Kidd, Cinders, and Bloover to the shack below the Logan cabin to discuss plans. He abruptly opened the council by declaring, "Some enemy's lighted on our trail. Someone's thinking to whittle us down till we're all rubbed out. Who did for poor Benito?"

"Who does for any man found dead in or on the outskirts of any of these towns?" countered Doctor Kidd. "The fool probably quit his post to go to town and get a drink. Someone saw he had a poke of dust and followed him to the edge of th and did for him. His pockets were e

"Pro'b'ly how it happened," gr Cram, tugging hard at his beard. " had several hundred in dust that I know of. Well, he's gone. But I don't 'tend to wait till someone else is rubbed out. We've got to do something quick. We'll soon be noticed and talked about, and taken for road agents."

"I'm for action," quickly encouraged Kidd. "I don't want any 7-3-77 card pinned on my sleeve."

"Shut up about vigilantes," said Cram, his dark eyes looking afraid. "We ain't done a thing to stir up them pests. But we're gitting nowhere. We must git to work. I reckon that gold's within a mile of here. Things must hum from now on. To begin with I'm going to shift the

cut on that Reese. He's cold-decking us."

"Easy, Cap'n," murmured Kidd. "We must be soft 'n' gentle with Reese. He's talked with the girl. He knows more'n he'll let on. After we learn certain things we can act up rough with him. Until then he's our dear brother."

"A body would think to hear you talk that you was the only one in this outfit with any brains under your hair," sneered Cram. "You have an uppity way with me at times that's rasping. Who's talked about being rough with Reese before we ought to? If he knows about the gold it's because the girl told him. He didn't know in Rocker when he come into my saloon and asked us to chip in with him. So this is what I'm going to do right away. Run the girl ten miles into the hills, back to Sammy Danver's old shack, and make her tell."

"What's to stop Reese from lifting the dust and vamoosing, if he knows where it is?" asked Cinders.

"Well put," said Cram, and nodding his shaggy head in approval. "I'm gamblin' he's sweet on the girl. That's my answer. Made all that talk about giving her a third. When we first blew in he said he wouldn't stand for any abuse to her. If he ain't sweet on her, and if he knows where the stuff's hid, why hasn't he tried to lift it? What's your notion, Kidd?"

"Haven't a doubt but what he's sweet on her. Showed it in his talk with me," promptly replied Kidd.

"There it is! At least the girl knows where the gold's hid. And if my guess is right Reese will come pounding into the hills after the girl, if he feels toward her as the doctor 'n' me reckon he does. Then we'll have both of them. If neither will talk, why we'll hold them at Danver's shack until we've ripped out the Logan cabin and had a peek under them beds of posies. They look suspicious to me. Flowers! Then if we don't find color we'll let Reese see us work on the girl to make her tell. He'll tell the truth to save her. What's your notion, Kidd?"

"It sounds good. Can't lose. Ought to win. How will you work it, and when?"

"Tonight, right after sundown, before the stars git to lighting things up. All you've got to do is to keep Reese in town for an hour after sundown so he can't bother us. It won't take but half a minute if the road's clear."

"My part's easy. But the girl will shoot you on sight," warned Kidd.

"She don't know me by sight; only by name. I'll play a game on her. Leave that to me. I'll catch her off her guard and one of the boys will grab her. Cinders and Bloover will keep close in this shack till middle of the afternoon. Then Cinders will buy a burro, load it with grub and start for the Danver place. Bloover will stay and help me."

Despite his indorsement Kidd did not relish the scheme. He feared some game. He could not credit Cram with much ingenuity, and yet the leader's sudden decision, without any preliminary discussion, bothered him. His first suspicion was that Reese and Cram had reached a working agreement and were planning to drop him out of the circle. Yet he readily assented, saying:

"It can't do any harm, and it may help us. You'll find it hard to out-Injun that girl. She mustn't have time to scream. It must be done very smoothly."

"Leave it to me to do it smooth," said Cram with a chuckle. "She'll give no alarm. You go to town, Doctor; circulate 'round and fetch up with Reese and keep him with you for an hour after sunset."

"I'll do my best," promised Kidd. "But if he takes a notion to call on the girl I'll have to bend a gun barrel over his head."

"Bend it in that case," ordered Cram; and Kidd discarded his first suspicion. "Now Cinders can go for a burro and buy the grub and start."

"What if Reese catches on that Cinders is buying a mule and some grub?" asked Kidd.

"It won't make any difference. We want him to chase along. With the two of them back in the hills we'll have plain sailing."

Kidd rose and brushed the dust from his clothes and assented, "All right. I'm off to look up Reese. He was playing poker at the Pilgrim's Rest an hour ago. I don't believe he'll offer to go to the Logan shack after dark." Saying this he left the shack and mounted his horse and rode up the road. A few rods away he reined in and turned and stared at the squat structure as if seeking to read the riddle he believed to be contained in Cram's sudden plan. Once the gold was found it would mean a survival of the most vicious. But there was Cram taking the initiative. Invariably

he sought his companion's advice when contemplating anything of importance.

H E BROODED over the problem so deeply as he walked his horse up the road that he was not conscious of the slim figure in calico bending over the flower beds at the Logan cabin. As he came in sight of the Rest he suddenly threw up his head, and murmured, "Can that be the answer! Is it possible that thickhead has fooled us all!"

Instead of taking his horse to the livery stable he rode to a small corral and turned his mount over to the keeper, and paused to remark, "Some lively burros you have in back. Sell many?"

"Good trade in 'em," said the keeper. "No one else has bothered to handle 'em. I outfit for parties leaving Butte and Rocker as well as this town. Sort of got my name up for filling the bill."

Kidd nodded and entered a saloon near the corral and seated himself by a window and called for beer. He remained an hour, sipping his beverage and watching the corral. At last he was rewarded by seeing Cram, instead of Cinders, ride up and dismount. He saw him talk some minutes with the corralkeeper and finally left with a burro which he led to Collins' store and hitched and left. Kidd emerged and went to the Pilgrim's Rest. From a bartender he learned Reese was still playing poker in the back room. He watched a monte game in a corner where he could look out on the street until he saw Cram come from the store with a quantity of provisions. He went back for more supplies, and when he had packed these the small animal was all but concealed by the load. Then he led the burro down the road and Cinders joined him.

Kidd hurried to the corral and secured his horse and mounted. When he offered to pay the keeper told him, "Hardly worth charging for, he was here such a short time."

"You must make a profit to keep in business," said Kidd, and he tossed the man a dollar. Then he asked, "Seen anything of my friend, Cap'n Cram?"

"He was here just after you left your hoss. Did a good stroke of business with him. Sold him six burros, but he took only one way. Calling for the rest later."

"I knew he planned on buying some,"

murmured Kidd. He suddenly wheeled his horse and rode off before the man could read the terrible rage convulsing for the moment his dark face. At the saloon close by he dismounted and hitched his horse to the rack and went inside and stood at the end of the bar and ordered a drink. This time he called for whisky and bolted it at a gulp, and refilled his glass.

He heard nothing of the babbling radiating from the long line of thirsty men. Over and over he was telling himself, "Damn him! He's found it! He's found it!"

After the second drink he stood with his head bowed, not daring to look his neighbor in the face lest his mental plight be observed. A third stiff drink of the fiery liquor steadied his nerve. When he made for the door he was Doctor Kidd of the flashing teeth and sardonic smile. He halted in front of the saloon and endeavored to form some plan of action. It would never do to betray his suspicion until the gold was uncovered. He now believed three people knew the secret: the Logan girl, Reese, and Cram. That the last should have stumbled upon it hurt his pride. He had looked on Cram as being no more subtle than an ox. He had trailed along with the outfit, content that Cram should pose as leader, as that suited his convenience. Now he was angry because he was compelled to pay homage to Cram.

"Who ever would have believed that that lunkhead had brains enough to plan a game which would withdraw Cinders and Bloover into the hills and keep me pos here to ride herd on Reese?" he answered, muttered. Cram possessed a latent cunning he had not suspected. He would lead the girl to Cinders and Bloover, to kill them if they took the notion, and he would find some good reason for returning to town. And that would be the last they should see of Captain Cram.

Kidd checked off the different points, quite cool now and very astute. As his cunning brain began working at its best his anger gradually left him. He finished his rapid cogitations with a smile of genuine pleasure. His pride had been hurt for a bit; now he was deciding nothing could have happened more fortunately. He rejoiced that Tiger Logan's secret had not ended in the grave. He walked jauntily into the Pilgrim's Rest and made for the back room. Reese was seated behind sev-

eral big stacks of chips and was betting a local gambler off the board.

Kidd stood behind him for several pots before Reese turned his head and discovered him. "I felt your sweet presence, Doctor," he cordially greeted. "But you remember what I told you last night. I'm not the one to watch if you want an eye-ful."

"Just killing time," said Kidd.

A player rose and said, "I'm cashing in. Take my place."

Kidd slid onto the stool and drew out a bag of dust and took chips. Reese's interest in the game vanished. He made his bets mechanically and after a round he cashed in. Kidd suddenly remembered an important piece of business and did likewise. Outside the door Reese halted and asked, "Well, what is it?"

"Cram is up to some kind of a game," murmured Kidd. "I'll play in with you at least until the pot's uncovered. Your own idea, you'll remember."

"Blindman's buff," sneered Reese.

"No. It's a big talk," earnestly insisted Kidd. "Meet me here tonight at sundown and I'll have news. It will be very important."

"But we're here now. Why wait till sundown?"

"One more fact I want to learn definitely. And I can do it. Will you be here? It'll be worth hearing. I can say right now that Cram's planning to cold-deck us."

"Bah!" jeered Reese. "We're all trying to cold-deck each other. There's no loyalty when gold, or a woman, is the prize. As for Cram he couldn't fool a blind horse. But I'll be here if nothing unusual calls me away. And you make it sharp."

Kidd nodded and hurried to the street, mounted, and cantered down the road. Reese watched him from the doorway and endeavored to guess his game. He had detected a note of fierceness in Kidd's bearing and tone. But whether Kidd's news concerned his interest, or was merely a play to secure his help in an offensive move against Cram, he could not decide. Of one thing he was positive: Kidd was looking out for himself.

"Like a deaf man playing with those sharks in the back room," grumbled Reese. "I know something is happening to me, but

don't know just what it is." Acting on an impulse he took to the street and walked down to the Logan cabin.

ANNIE LOGAN was working over the flower beds. She rose with a flush of annoyance on beholding him.

"Look here!" she greeted. "What do you mean by trailing down here. I thought you understood your company's not wanted."

He threw himself on the grass and earnestly told her, "I'm trying to make you believe that I've got something besides Plummer's gold on my mind. So far as I'm concerned you can have it all."

She laughed shortly and reminded, "But I have it all."

"Don't bleat it out like that!" he begged as he cast suspicious glances about the premises, and feared eavesdroppers. Then very earnestly, "Don't you ever admit to anyone else on earth that you know. You're being watched most of the time. Being watched now, most likely."

She dusted the dirt from her hands, and in a low voice told him, "I'm tired of this. Tired of being watched by members of your gang. I don't want you to come here again. I couldn't help the way my father acted about that dust. I couldn't stop him. But I can keep from knowing any more folks taken the same way. There's a curse on Plummer's stealings. I'll not touch them. Nor shall anyone else by means of any talk from me. Now I want you to go and stay away. Is that plain enough?"

"Even a yaller dog would get your drift, Miss Annie," he replied as he rose to his feet. "But I'm not one of Cram's outfit."

"You're an idler, a loafer. I can't see that you do anything but hang around and try to make a fortune out of money stolen from poor, unfortunate people."

He picked up his hat, bowed and left her. Her words seared his soul. He resented the rank injustice of it. He had found the treasure, and her reckless father had stolen it from him. He admitted he might have fared better had he given up the long hunt and had put in his time working a placer. But that was no criminal error. And his jaw set as he swung up the road, and he vowed he would play the game out, let the girl think what she would.

Left alone, by her own wish, the girl lost her interest in the flowers. She almost regretted her words to the likable young man: that is, likable if engaged in some honest work. Of course his visits to her had to be discouraged, but she was sorry she had called him a "loafer." Next she became angry that she carried him in her thoughts at all. Entering the cabin she began packing a rawhide box with her personal effects. She was tired of it all: mountains; rough men, the eternal talk of gold, and all else. Reese had urged her to go to Butte. She would go farther than that. She would go to the States. She had enough gold, honestly come by, to support her for two or three years, or much longer than she would require while finding a niche of decency and helpfulness to fit into.

Her belongings were soon disposed of, and she came to her father's guns. He had lived a hard, rough life, although always gentle and loving to her. The guns reminded her of cruel things. She hesitated, but only for a moment. To leave them would make her feel she was disloyal to him; and they were added to the contents of the shallow box. Then she did something she never would want young Reese to know, something her father would be ashamed of, could he know. She broke into passionate weeping. The weakness enveloped her so quickly she had no time to fight against it.

After a few minutes she regained control of herself and bathed her face and proceeded to Collins' store and made a few purchases, and arranged with a young and worshipful clerk to engage passage for her on the morning stage. Now she had decided to leave she could not go soon enough. Reese would think she was bound for Butte and would little guess she was traveling to Salt Lake City, to Denver, and thence by Ben Holiday's stage to North Platte, then the terminus of the Union Pacific, where she could revive childish memories by again riding on a railroad.

In the store and on the street she furtively glanced around, expecting to see Reese. She could not tell whether she was pleased or sorry she had not glimpsed him. The sun was teetering on a lofty range when she returned to her cabin for the last night in gold land. She cooked and ate

her supper. She washed the dishes and saw that all was in order, although she was leaving the place to shelter the first straggler. As she finished her work and suddenly decided she felt lonely, and was wishing the night away, her attention was attracted to the road by a wild outcry. Mechanically she took her father's guns from the box and stepped to the window. She dropped the weapons on beholding a man prostrate in the road, his horse standing by. Another man was hastily dismounting to bend over the fallen man. Throwing the guns aside she ran out to see if she could give aid to the unfortunate. Already he was being helped toward the cabin by his companion, who half carried, half dragged him along.

"Is he badly hurt?" she asked as the man lowered his burden to the ground.

"If you'll git me some water," mumbled the shaggy-haired man. She wheeled to enter the house and at the doorway was enveloped in a blanket. She struggled fiercely and attempted to call out. She heard a sharp whistle and the sound of hoofs as the two horses ceased grazing and answered the signal. Then she was being bundled into the arms of a mounted man and was being carried away, the horses going at a mad gallop. She knew when they left the road and took to a rough trail.

WHILE this was happening, Reese, bitter of heart, was keeping his appointment with Doctor Kidd. His greeting caused Kidd's brows to rise. Both tone and words were surly. He said here as I agreed, but I shan't be in in any talk you can make. I'm hunting for Plummer's gold, and chasing around with you, or any of your damned gang."

Kidd did not speak for half a minute, but bored his gaze into the sullen eyes. Then he smiled slightly and whispered, "You're through hunting because you know where it is."

"I do not know. You've fooled yourself right along. You believed I was lying when I was telling the truth. I'm just quitting all treasure-hunting. Tired of it. Going to locate a placer and get some dust which never was in a dead man's pocket. It's all so simple you'd never believe it."

"Very virtuous," sneered Kidd. "But that particular pup won't fight. You agreed

to play in with me against Cram——”

“Cram!” exclaimed Reese in disgust. “That fool couldn’t find his own tracks in winter. He’s banking on me, on you, on anybody, to find the stuff. Then he banks on his gun play to get it away from the finder. I’m through, and you’ll be wasting your breath to talk about it.”

Kidd laughed silently and appeared to be highly amused. “You have a right to quit. Every man has. And maybe I am wasting my breath. But I promised to meet you here and report what I could learn. I’m going through with my part of the bargain even if you turn tail and run. I haven’t learned an awful lot, but enough to satisfy me Cram’s new game has something to do with the gold.”

“New game?” dully repeated Reese. “Any game he works has to do with gold. But I know of nothing new he can try.”

“He’s tried you and made nothing. Now he’s giving his attention to the Logan girl . . . But you’re drawing out, and not interested.”

Reese straightened and half closed his eyes. “I’m waiting, Kidd,” he prompted.

“Then you are interested, eh? Well, it sounds rather blind but I gather that Cram plans to follow Cinders’ advice and run the girl into the hills. I heard him speak of Sammy Danver’s old shack.”

“Go on!”

“After I talked with you today I learned that Cinders had taken a load of grub in back somewhere.”

“And Cram didn’t take you completely into his confidence?” murmured Reese, his eyes dilating.

Kidd’s gaze was focused on the two thumbs hooked into the belt, the right hand being all but resting on a weapon. He boldly said, “I’d hardly be telling you this if I was in on the play. But Cram plans to be rid of me. I’ve seen it coming for some time. It may not amount to anything, the burroload of grub, the mention of Danver’s old shack. Or it may be they intend running off with the girl as was planned in the back room when you were present. If so, I’m kicking at the treachery of it. For it was never planned that Cram should sneak her away without all of us being in on the deal.”

“If Cram tries to do that I’ll kill him.” And Reese turned to leave the saloon.

Kidd caught him by the arm and softly

cried, “What’s the matter with you? You knew it was spoken of. There! I’m a fool. Of course you’re hot under the collar, just as I am, to think Cram would try to cold-deck us by stealing her without letting us know.”

“You stay here, while I take a short walk. Miss Logan isn’t going to be carried into the hills by anyone. I’m going now to warn her to come into town here, or to go to Butte.”

“I’ll be here if you’re not gone too long,” said Kidd.

Reese hurried down the road and turned in toward the cabin before he had the slightest suspicion he was too late. The girl was nowhere in sight, and the door of the cabin was open. He called her name several times, hoping to see the chestnut curls at the window, hoping even to hear her voice curtly ordering him away. But the place was dead. Still calling her name he ventured into the doorway. He saw an open rawhide box, and what he took to have been its contents were scattered on the floor.

As he turned to leave the room he glimpsed Tiger Logan’s guns, .45’s, in a corner. On an impulse he picked them up and thrust them through his belt. Then he started on a run and held to that pace until he reached the livery stable. Securing his horse he galloped from town, with Logan’s guns still in his belt. Doctor Kidd, at a window of the Pilgrim’s Rest, saw him ride forth in frantic haste. He softly rubbed his hands and smiled.

CHAPTER IV

EUCHRED!

SAMMY DANVER’S abandoned shack, back in the hills, was well known. For he, like Henry Plummer, had buried gold. Danver’s dust was honest dust, however, some seven thousand dollars’ worth. And he had cached it so securely, while under the influence of whisky, that he never had been able to find it. After Danver’s death on the delirium tremens trail, men out of luck, or feeling lucky, took much time off to prospect around the shack. Reese had been there and knew the country well.

When Reese reached the side trail he entered it at a gallop, reckless of the twists and turns and occasional rocks. Not until his horse gave signs of distress did he clear

his mind and slow down. The trail wound in and out, but always ascended, and the stars were so many flaming beacons when he finally halted on a rocky ridge fringed with stunted pines. Ahead, in a little hollow, was the blaze of a campfire. The dancing light reached far enough to reveal the low log cabin. Slipping from the saddle Reese surveyed the scene closely and was surprised to discover only two men. He walked boldly down the slope towards the fire.

The men leaped to their feet and one cried out, "Is that you, Cap'n?"

Thus Reese learned Cram was not yet to be reckoned with. He called back, "I'm Jim Reese, packing news about the cap'n. Don't get foolish with guns."

His hands were at his belt as he strode up to them. Cinders and Bloover exchanged glances but could come to no understanding. They had supposed that Cram was through with the young man. From the corner of his mouth Bloover warned his mate, "It's the cap'n's row if there's to be a row." He slumped down on the ground and eyed Reese coldly.

"Three guns in your belt. You're painted for war," cried Cinders.

"Just two extra guns, good ones, I happened to pick up. Carried by Tiger Logan in his day. They've come to find his daughter. Where is she?"

Both men came to their feet, clawing feebly at their belts. But Reese had a gun out and was cautioning, "Don't act up like two fools and get yourselves killed. That is, don't do it unless you want Cram and Doctor Kidd to divide the Plummer gold."

"What d'ya mean?" roared Bloover.

"Yes, Reese. You've got to say more'n that!" cried Cinders.

"Cram has rung in a cold deck on you two. You're losing a fortune."

"If the cap'n was here he'd make you chaw them words," said Cinders truculently.

"The cap'n not only isn't here, and doesn't intend to return here, but he's got you boys out of the way while he and Kidd split the pot."

"You're trying to run a bluff on us," panted Bloover.

Reese laughed softly and taunted, "You were two big fools to come up here and ride herd on the girl while your boss and Doctor Kidd scoop up the loot and carry it away . . . Miss Annie, are you all right?"

"Yes. But let me out," she called from the tiny window in the cabin.

"Have they treated you civilly?"

"Aside from stealing me from my house, yes. But let me out!"

"Just a minute. I don't want you 'round if any lead's going to fly wild . . . What do you say, you two? Peace or war? I shall take the girl back anyway."

"The second we believe the cap'n's workin' a crooked deal we'll vote for peace. Our business will be where he is," stolidly replied Bloover.

"Good. By this time Cram is digging up the lost gold."

Cinders stared wildly at Bloover. The latter exclaimed, "If we could only know that! But you're bluffing."

"I don't need to bluff with your kind. You won't lift a hand to stop me when I go to the cabin, toss a gun through the window and then unfasten the door. But the only way I can get even with Cram just now is to send you men to him. He's located the gold and he's hauling out tonight."

"I reckon that's another lie—" began Bloover, when the girl's shrill voice silenced him, crying, "He speaks the truth! The gold was buried under the floor of the old shack, where you villains have been staying while you spied on my cabin."

"Good God!" screamed Cinders, "You mean we folks been sleeping on top of more'n a quarter of a million dollars?"

Bloover howled like an animal and raced for his horse. Without bothering to secure a saddle he mounted, and, like a madman, rode away. Cinders curses after Bloover, but was quick to horse and ride for the Silver L.

Reese ran to the cabin and unfastened the door. As Annie Logan emerged he seized her hands without realizing what he was doing.

"Are you hurt?" he cried.

"My feelings are hurt most mortal, Mister Reese. They walked in and dropped a blanket over my head and lugged me off. The man with the whiskers was the leader, but he rode away once he'd locked me in the cabin. Told the two men he was off to find Kidd, but would be back before morning. They reckoned it was him when you came pounding into the pines. I heard them say the cap'n had changed his mind and wasn't going to town. I felt mighty low."

"He'll be back. We must be getting out of here," he told her. Now that it was all over Reese could find nothing heroic in the situation. He had expected fierce gun play; and it had been as tame as chasing rabbits.

"He won't be back tonight," she said. "See you've got pap's guns. Then you went to the cabin."

"Yes. It was in disorder. Doctor Kidd gave me a tip as to where you'd been taken. I don't know what his object was, unless it was to get me up here where they could have the two of us. But I'll always thank him for speaking the truth for once in his life, even if he rides in with Cram within the next five minutes."

"But they won't be back," she insisted.

"Oh, but he will, Miss Annie. We must find a roundabout way to Silver Bow so's not to meet them. Kidd will never quit either you, or me, until the gold's uncovered. Cram won't quit him for fear of losing out."

"They haven't found the gold?" she gasped.

He laughed in high amusement, and explained, "Of course that yarn was made up. Just a trick of mine to get Cinders and Bloover away. Neither Cram, or Kidd, would have believed it for a second. If I'd blown in and told them that story they'd be mighty quick to ask why I was here and not with the gold. The other two can't use their heads. Cram fetched you here so he could have a chance to do some digging among your flower beds. That's all."

She halted and placed a hand on his arm and quietly said, "But they know now. At least the two who ran away know. I told them. I didn't want any shooting along of me. Better they take the gold and have it spoil their lives, just as it has spoiled pap's and mine. Far better they take it and ride away then to have you killed, Mister Reese. Enough blood's been spilled over the awful stuff. It fetches death to everyone who tries to carry it away. From the first owner, down through Plummer, to all who get a glimpse of it. You've done me a good turn. I'm glad I told, as it will be a good turn for you. I've wanted to get you away from that trail and onto a trail that leads to honest work. I called you names without knowing the truth. And you came to help me in spite of that. That's mighty fine and friendly in you.

Now let them ride with the gold, and it's the worst luck I could wish them."

Her revelation stunned him. When he could speak he cried, "Miss Annie, what are you talking about? You told them? All you did was to chip in to help my game with a story about it being buried in the old shack——"

"But it was! It was," she whispered. "Pap said it was the most unlikely place folks would ever suspect. Bummers and floaters have stopped there, and nary a one ever guessed what was under their blankets. The gold's been buried in the old shack all the time."

"Good Lord! What a fool I was to be so blind, so——"

"Here! Stop that! No running away from me now," she fiercely cried, and her hand caught his wrist as if to hold him back by main strength.

He stared foolishly at the slim fingers encircling his wrist, then smiled broadly.

"You can't drive me away," he assured her. "I'd come after you just the same if there'd been eighteen billions in gold scattered all along the Silver Bow road. But to think I never guessed it! So Cram had you brought up here to keep Cinders and Bloover out of the game while he dug the gold. Kidd gave me the tip to get me out of the way. He figured Cinders and Bloover would put up a fight, and the more of us killed the better. He stayed in town. I'll get him . . . I'll catch the burro and you can ride him."

She fell back from him and asked, "You'd go on ahead and leave me to make it alone." And the flickering light revealed much misery in her small face.

"You know better. But I'm rather heavy for a burro."

"A burro'll carry as heavy a load as a horse, and carry it farther. I'll ride your horse, Mister Reese, and you can lead him. I'll ride half the way, and you can ride the rest. You'll not make Silver Bow in time to have a gun fight with Kidd if you keep your word and keep with me. And I'd believed you were done thinking about the gold!"

"I am done," he hoarsely declared. "But I'm never done with Kidd till he's dead, nor with Cram, for planning to get me killed, get Cinders and Bloover killed, leaving you locked in that shack to die of slow starvation. I wouldn't follow them

for a mile, for all the gold in the Rockies. But I'll follow them to the door of hell for leaving you locked up . . . It makes me feel bad, Miss Annie, that you could believe I'd scoot off and leave you."

"I'm sorry. I didn't understand. I've been brought up to trust no man, except pap, who had in his blood the fever for getting hold of Plummer's gold. Forget about me being locked up. I'd busted loose some-way."

"Everything is all right," he calmly assured as he led her to his horse. "They found what I had found. It's human nature to want a whack at it. But I won't try to get it back. Now we'll start."

FOR ten miles he walked ahead of the horse, talking over his shoulder to the girl. He had discovered the real Annie Logan; a voluble, animated, laughter-loving companion. She talked much more than he, for he was still brooding over the dastardly conduct of the treasure-hunters. He kept living over the arduous, exasperating experiences of the last three days, and his play for a fortune in thieves' gold in preference to honest placer hunting. He could not help recalling his elation when he finally succeeded in locating the horde. He had dubbed himself a genius. It was a sad reflection on his perspicacity that he had overlooked the possibilities of the old shack. He had searched long in less likely places. It hurt him cruelly that Cram had euchred him, that even now Kidd was laughing at him. Nevertheless, he could put that all behind him and count himself the winner in that he had won the friendship of this delightful young woman. But he never could put behind him the ruthless plan of using her as a decoy; a plan which could only succeed if she was left to starve in Danver's shack.

"I talk and talk, and you don't say much of anything, Mister Reese," she was complaining.

"Maybe it's because you 'mister' me, Miss Annie. Most folks call me Jim. I'm fair tickled to hear you talk. Best music I ever heard."

"Not pretty music when I called you names. I've been trying to tell you how badly I felt at not understanding you."

"You're a good girl, Miss Annie. Most of what you said was the truth. I have been a floater. If I hadn't made money off

the tables to pay for my keep I'd been a bumner," he moodily said.

"But you're not such an old man that you can't learn to work," she reminded.

"I've done what thousands out here do—play only for big pots."

"But gambling never made a man yet," she persisted.

"I'll be trying to be very decent pretty soon," he mumbled. "You could make a man do most anything, I reckon."

"I'm not making over any man," she retorted. "That sort of upbuilding has to come from inside."

"Preacher," he laughed.

"I'd never tell you a word I didn't believe was for you own good," she earnestly insisted.

He allowed the horse to crowd along beside him so he could pat one of her slim hands. He paused long enough to say:

"You couldn't say anything that wasn't for a body's good. I could say lots more, but you're alone with me in the hills, and you feel sort of thankful that I bothered to blow in and help you out. By and by, when you're in town, surrounded by friends, I'm coming up to the door and say, 'Annie Logan, the prodigal has come back. He hones to be everything you wish!' I'll take my answer then; not now."

"But why go away and wander round playing the prodigal? Do you want to do that?"

He moved hurriedly to the head of the horse and replied, "I'll come as soon as I've finished a certain job."

"And that's what?" she anxiously

"To even up with Cram and K. fetching you to that shack and leave there with Cinders and Bloover. beast. He's welcome to the gold, but he must pay for that. You'd never respect a man who would let that pass."

She knew it was useless to argue, or plead. It was all talked out. All she could do was to detain him from taking up the pursuit. She purposely held back the horse to give Cram more time in securing a lead. All she could hope for now was that the gold had been quickly discovered and immediately taken far away. He understood her play for delay, but patiently plodded along, standing and waiting when she reined in on the pretense of resting her mount. At last they came to the Silver Bow road, Reese striding ahead and the

wise little burro bringing up the rear. A ten mile ride and a ten mile walk should have tired him, she hoped.

She breathed more freely when they came to the squat bulk of the shack and saw no light, nor heard no sounds. She waited while he entered.

He found himself on the edge of a deep hole. He stepped down into this and felt around with his hands. His fingers found a gold piece. He dropped it and returned to the girl. He briefly reported, "They've found it. Made a clean sweep."

"May it be taken away so far it will never come back near our lives again!" she fervently declared.

"There was a lot of it," he mused. "They can't be traveling very fast. Who do you know in town? You mustn't go back to your cabin."

"Nonsense. No one is interested in Annie Logan now the cache has been found."

"I am. More than ever."

"And I'd scarcely wake up anyone in town and ask them to take me in without giving an explanation. Give me one of pap's guns. Not that I need it."

He believed she would be perfectly safe, and it was useless to argue with her. He went as far as the door of the cabin and waited until she made a light, and said, "Here's the gun."

She reached forward and took his own weapon from his belt and said, "You carry pap's. But, oh, I do wish you would not keep on!"

"Ask anything within my power after I come back. Good night." Then he was in the saddle and riding up the road.

LIFE in town was at its height. He left the horse with the corral man and hurriedly made a round of the resorts. Not a member of the Cram outfit could be found; nor did he expect to find them. It was simply an initial move he believed he must make. Returning to the corral he told the keeper:

"Been trying to find some men from Rocker. Doctor Kidd is one of them."

"I know him. Slim, dandified sort of a cuss. Talked with me today right after another Rocker man, Cram, bought some burros of me."

"Erhu? Haven't seen him or Cram this evening?"

"Kidd rode down the road after dark. Neither he, nor Cram has come back. I've been out here in front all the time."

"Couldn't pass in the dark without you knowing it?" persisted Reese; for in the back of his mind he was wondering if Cram wouldn't return to Rocker and hide his gold in his saloon.

"Not by a jugful! I don't have to use my eyes, and they're mighty keen. After a hoss passes me once I can pick him out blindfolded by his gait. No two walk just alike, no more'n humans do. If I'm busy with my back to the road when you ride by I'll say to myself, 'There goes Gambling Jim Reese on his big roan.'"

"I see. Gambling Jim Reese, eh? So that's my handle."

"More'n ever since you cleaned out the boys in the Rest this afternoon."

"Thanks. I'll take my horse. Got to go somewhere."

At Collins' store he bought some bacon and bread, two new blankets, and a generous supply of ammunition. Then he returned to the vicinity of the Logan cabin and picketed his horse and slept until early dawn.

He found himself relying on the evidence of the corralkeeper, and believing that Cram and Kidd had not returned to town. Whether Cram was alone, or traveling with Kidd and the others, he must be striking west for some out of the way place where he could cache the bulk of his loot. It was all a gamble, and while he did not relish his new title he must be Gambling Reese once more. He turned off the road and took a westerly course, a short distance from the foothills on his left. At sunrise he was riding slowly and scanning the ground. The burros and horsemen were bound to leave signs.

He came to the print of a shod hoof in one place. He noticed where some animal, presumably a burro, had browsed on bush growth in passing. Reese was in no hurry and allowed his horse to walk much of the time. At the end of ten miles he dismounted and walked with the horse at his heels. As he halted where the backbone of a ridge crossed his course he noticed his horse was pricking his ears. He listened and was startled to hear a faint cry on his left. Again it came and he identified it as a human voice. He suspected a trap and for a minute remained motionless. At

quite regular intervals the cry reached him. He spoke to his horse and, with the animal walking beside him to serve as a shield, he advanced toward a fringe of bush growth. The voice came from within, or just beyond the bushes.

He pressed forward; then halted.

"Water! water!" the voice was monotonously calling.

He grabbed a canteen from his saddle and, with gun drawn, rushed forward.

"Where are you? Who is it?" he cried.

"Water! In God's mercy, water! I'm right here. Water!" wailed the voice.

He made his way into the bushes and found the sufferer. The man was on his back, with his head and shoulders concealed by overhanging branches. Reese drew him into full view and knelt beside him. He was startled to find the man was Cinders. He had been shot in the side and chest. He gave him a drink, and asked:

"Who did this to you?"

The dying man stared up blankly for a bit. Then intelligence flickered across his stark face. With a last effort he gasped, "Cap'n Cram—dropped back with me to fix a pack—shot me down before you could spit—damn him!"

The eyes rolled and Reese feared he had gone. Bending low and splashing water on the man's face he loudly asked, "Where was he making for, Cinders?" He got no reply. "I'm Jim Reese. I'm hunting for Cram to kill him. Where is he making for?"

With an effort Cinders struggled back from the deep shadows and the fluttering lips murmured, "Big Hole."

"You mean the Big Hole Mountains?" persisted Reese.

The lips formed an affirmative.

CHAPTER V.

A PLUMMER DIVIDEND

THE murder of Cinders affected Reese profoundly. It stressed Cram's bloody insistence on sharing the treasure with as few as possible. Instead of a smashing pursuit, a quick overhauling of the patient burros, and a gamble at gun play, Reese listened to the voice of caution and decided to take more time and caution. He took it for granted that Kidd was with

Cram, inasmuch as the doctor had vanished from Silver Bow.

For an hour he pondered over the situation and arrived at two major conclusions. The gold would be taken into one of the many little ravines of the Big Hole Mountains and cached. The three men, if Kidd was one of them, would bide their time in getting the gold across the range and down into the Beaver Head country, to Virginia City; or they would move it north to Deer Lodge City. These two objectives would permit, respectively, the conveyance of the gold to Salt Lake City and Denver, or to the States by the way of Helena, Fort Benton and down the Missouri. Did they discover he was hunting them they would not attempt a running fight, but would wait until they could ambush him, or he had tired of blind searching. He had one great advantage: they could not suspect he had learned their destination from the dying Cinders.

Yet the Big Hole Mountains constituted too big a hiding place to be combed in a hurry. The flight had been so abrupt it eliminated the probability of an adequate food supply. They must send out for food unless they were willing to live on game. Captain Cram would never go without his whisky. Reese was adamant in demanding the full price for the hideous fate they had offered Annie Logan, but the lust of coming to grips, with the odds against him, passed away. He shifted his course to the northwest and watched for travelers from the west. He saw a smoke before he saw any horsemen. He made for it and rode down to reconnoiter two men cooking over a fire. They were strangers and came up to them on a gallop.

The men, seeing the two guns in his belt, scanned him suspiciously and picked up their rifles and began examining them. He slid from the saddle and gave them a cheerful greeting. They responded in a neighborly manner and asked him to take pot-luck. But they did not appear to be at ease until he unbuckled his heavy belt and tossed it aside. One of them then remarked, "You travel light in grub, stranger, but heavy in guns."

"I have bacon and ordinary fixings in my blanket roll, but I'll relish fresh meat. The guns are a nuisance. I never have carried more than one until this brace was given to me."

"I see. Prospecting?" asked the second man lazily, his sweeping glance at horse and blanket roll revealing the entire absence of a miner's equipment.

"Trying to catch up with some men who pulled out ahead of me from Silver Bow. They're packing the grub and what-all. Making for the Big Holes."

"Dish in and eat hearty . . . You're off your trail a trifle. The Big Hole Mountains are down thataway." And he pointed southwest toward the rugged heights.

Reese affected surprise and pointed to the snowy peaks ahead, and said, "I'd reckoned those were the Big Hole Mountains."

Both men laughed, and one explained, "You're plumb green, stranger. But we all have to learn. Them's the Bitter Root Range."

Reese grinned ruefully. Then he asked, "Is there some trading place between here and the Big Holes, where I can break my journey and buy some grub?"

The two exchanged glances. One replied, "Yes, there's a place—a big shebang with half a dozen small cabins stuck around it. But it ain't a mining camp, nor like the stores you'd find in Deer Lodge City. Men there have quite a lot of hosses—"

"Which they never raised, nor bought," bitterly cut in the second man.

"Hiram, your tongue will talk you into the path of a bullet some day."

"I don't give a cuss," was the stout reply. "We're hauling out. None of that thieving outfit can overtake us even if they could know what I've said."

"I'm no lover of thieves," said Reese. "No chance of my repeating anything you say. What's the name of the place?"

"Hootsville, after old man Hoot. He 'n' his two boys are rare hellions. Always several more of the same breed hanging 'round there."

"Horsethieves, eh?"

"Yes. And whisky smugglers to the Injuns, and several other things," said Hiram.

"And not a bit above cutting your weazen just for the prime guns you carry," added the second man.

"I can steer clear of them by going southwest?" asked Reese.

"Yes, if you keep head on for that summit with the deep dent in it you'll pass

them within couple of miles. But it'll be safer to strike due south and then skirt along the foothills to the west. That top I'm pointing at is Notch Mountain."

Reese glanced at the sun and bolted his dinner and buckled on his belt. He noticed Hiram leaned lazily back and flung out an arm so the hand rested on a rifle. He told them, "I thank you for your kidness in feeding me and advising me." As he mounted his horse he tossed twenty dollars in gold on the grass. The men shouted for him to take back his money, but he waved his hand and rode on. Hiram stood and gazed after him and ruefully told his companion:

"The blamed young fool can't see straight. Way he's aiming now will fetch him smack into Hootsville, and old Hoot 'n' his youngers will gather him in and add another hoss to their herd."

THE main building in Hootsville was a long cabin, which offered drink, gambling and food to wayfarers. Old man Hoot, tall and angular, had discarded his long coat and was sitting at a table playing solitaire, when he caught the rattle of galloping hoofs. He glanced swiftly around the room to see who was missing. Abner, his older son, was shaking dice with Kigel and Sas'fras at the bar. Lige Hoot, the younger son, was playing euchre with a yellow-haired young woman at the end of the room.

The old man called out, "See if that's Ben?"

"No—stranger," barked Kigel.

Hoot put on his long, black coat and buttoned it. The coat had openings slashed in the sides which permitted easy access to knife and revolver.

Abner's thin, wide mouth twisted in a grin as he told his companions, "Old man's putting on his ceremony coat. A wedding, or a funeral?"

"Not wedding," said Kigel, after glancing from the window. "Young feller on a prime horse."

"Mebbe it's a damn Mormon, come up to git the girl back," said Sas'fras as his gaze lingered on the woman with the yellow hair.

Old Hoot muttered, "I was wishin' it was that Hiram and his friend. But they ain't foolish enough to come back."

"It's only one man, pap."

Outside a clear voice saluted the saloon by lustily singing:

*"When good King Arthur ruled this land
He was a goodly King,
He stole three bags of barley meal
To make a bag of pudding."*

"Musical cuss," said Kigel. "Old man'll make him sing through his nose when he comes to pay for his dinner."

"Grub comes high out here," snickered Sas'fras.

Hoot senior softly snapped his fingers. The dice game was resumed. The old man sat on the edge of the table and idly swung a booted leg. The stranger entered and blinked his eyes to get rid of the sun glare.

"Well, now you're here, what'n hell you want?" harshly spoke up Hoot senior.

Reese faced him and genially cried, "What should I want but good liquor, food, and a game of cards." Then he noticed the girl and swept off his hat and bowed low. Young Lige said something in an undertone and the woman left the room. Lige then came forward walking stiff-legged. Halting close to Reese he surveyed him from head to heel. He could not conceal a gleam of envy as he observed the store clothes, the boots of French calf and the two big guns. He sneeringly greeted:

"You're some sweet-smellin' dandy, mister."

"That's scarcely the way to talk to me, my lad, a friendless stranger," said Reese gently. "I see a bar. I smell food cooking in back somewhere. I see provision for games of chance. I have ample means for paying my way. I can afford to lose quite a bit of gold at any game you men fancy you know something about. So don't get wolfish around the shoulders, young man." Turning to old Hoot he said, "Boys are much forwarder than when you and I were young."

With a shrill scream young Hoot sprang at him, his hands extended, his fingers hooked for gouging. The onlookers caught a flash of Reese's slim figure ducking, and they heard the *plank* of the blow that caught his assailant on the chin and straightened him out in mid-air and dropped him insensible. But none saw the blow start. Young Hoot had collapsed like a half-filled bag of meal before the spectators could perceive what had hap-

pened. Reese turned and told the old man:

"He'll be all right in a minute. Just throw some water on his head, or leave him to come around natural. Now while he's resting suppose we all have a drink."

Whatever rage was boiling over in the old man's mind was quenched for the time by the heavy bag of dust tossed carelessly on the bar. Abner Hoot glanced at his father for instructions.

"Weigh out a round of drinks, you fool!" harshly ordered Hoot. "Sas'fras, throw some water in the kid's face . . . Pretty way to treat comp'ny! Tryin' to claw 'em the minute they enter our home . . . You're welcome, mister. What handle do you want to go by?"

"Call me Destiny," gravely said Reese.

"Queer handle," mused Hoot. "What does it mean? Or is it a fambly name like Smith 'n' Jones?"

"Family name. Means something that's bound to happen. Ah! the lad is stirring. I pulled my punch so's not to hurt him."

Kigel boiled over. He dashed his slouch hat on the bar and cried, "Damme! I won't let any galoot crow in that low-down way. Lige wasn't looking for a trick."

"Well, you're looking. How'll *you* have it?" harshly challenged Reese.

"Kigel!" roared old Hoot's rasping voice. Kigel hesitated, then met the fierce gaze and picked up his hat and stared sullenly at the bag on the bar. Hoot turned to Reese and amiably remarked, "You're a stout cuss if you can always act like you talk. Just what's your game?"

"Gambling, speculating in hock, buying and selling placers. I never digging gold."

Lige opened his eyes and stared foolishly around him. Not until his gaze rested on the boots of French calf did he remember. With a wildcat's screech he came to his feet, swaying dizzily for a moment, and then lurched forward to renew his assault on Reese. The old man caught him from the front of his woolen shirt and with one swing of his long arm swept him off his feet and banged him against the wall.

"You, Lige Hoot," he muttered. "You behave. When I'm dead 'n' gone you 'n' Abner can run this place. And you'll make a mess of it. This man is buying liquor for all of us, and with a big bag of dust. You hear me?"

The fire died from Lige's eyes under the

flaming gaze of his father. He sullenly surrendered, "All right this time. But folks can't bang me 'round when I ain't looking without payin' for it."

"Mind your manners, or I'll break your neck. Take your liquor 'n' keep shet." And with another swing of his arm old Hoot fairly flung his son up to the bar.

"You done that by some damn trick," Lige told Reese.

"Of course. You should learn it. Simple, direct, and it fetches home the bacon," said Reese. "Well, men, if we're all friendly again let's liquor and then I'll eat. After that if any feels lucky at cards I'll sit in."

"A round of bracers 'n' some good food," mumbled old Hoot. "Then we'll try you at cards. Or if you want a bank game we have faro and monte."

"All are good, but poker's the game," Reese answered. "When I see men breaking their backs, digging gold, it makes me laugh. I always know that most of them are working for me." He laughed boisterously, and then threw back his head and in a mellow voice sang more about King Arthur and the larceny of the barley meal.

OLD Hoot was puzzled. He believed he knew, by repute at least, all the badmen in the territory, but he had never heard of one by the name of Destiny. If the stranger with the queer name was running a bluff he would call it in due time. The usual expedient of securing a wayfarer's gold was to get him drunk and take it, or have one of the men follow him when he departed. Either method usually secured the gold. And there had been those stubborn cases who entered the saloon and were never seen to leave it. Hoot stared tentatively at Reese while the latter was singing, and then glanced through the side window where transients had found their last bed under the sod. Suddenly his gaunt face underwent a radical change of expression. His broad mouth opened in a silent, cavernous laugh. He clapped a big hand on Reese's shoulder and cried:

"I like your style, mister. I like a man who believes in himself, and who backs his luck way across the board. You're more'n welcome. We'll have some high old times. If you can best us at cards we'll hustle 'round 'n' scrape together some more dust. If you lose we'll part good friends."

Reese heartily subscribed to this amiable sentiment. Sas'fras smothered a laugh and winked at Abner. Hoot heartily urged, "Now come into the eating room 'n' have some hot vittels. I know you must be hungry."

Reese accompanied him to a rear room and was given a seat at a long table. Hoot stepped to the door of the cook-room and bellowed, "Meat 'n' bread fixin's for one pilgrim. Dish up!" Returning to the table he stood and talked with Reese until a French-Indian girl brought in a platter of meat and coarse bread. After Hoot had clattered back to the barroom, closing the door behind him, Reese walked to a window and looked out at the several cabins. Off in the southwest he saw a mounted man and a burro approaching.

He took his place at the table, one facing the barroom door this time. The breed nodded approval and glanced stealthily at the doors and windows. Then she leaned forward and drew her fingers across her throat and in pantomime warned him to flee. She hurried away even before he could bow his appreciation. Reese wondered how many others she had warned in a similar manner, and how many had accepted her advice. He had indulged in braggadocio as he believed the Hoots would accept a man at his own appraisal. But he did not enjoy the situation. He knew he was in a nest of mankillers, who would strike from behind. He lacked none in courage but he had sense enough to feel afraid of such big odds. He ate slowly and between mouthfuls watched the barroom door and the windows on his right. He was afraid, and yet he purposed remaining until he got a definite clue.

He knew when the horseman came up as Hoot greeted him from the doorway. The newcomer replied and there was something familiar in his voice. Reese rose and craned his neck. He could glimpse the horse and the burro. The man was not in his line of vision. With two swift strides he was beside the window and slyly peering out. Bloover was packing supplies on the steps. Lige Hoot was urging him to come inside and have a drink. Bloover grinned longingly, but refused, saying:

"Hankerin' to but don't dast. But I'll have plenty of drink at the end of my trip. Got to start back at once. Have to come here again inside a week."

"A long, lonely trip," spoke up old man Hoot. "Wouldn't you like to have one of my boys ride part way with you?"

"Hankerin' for comp'ny, but Cap'n Cram wouldn't like it. He might come to meet me. Cap'n's fussy."

"Cap'n Cram, is it?" mused Hoot. "He's one who wants orders followed. A prime feller is Cram. You tell him Cap'n Hoot would like to have a talk with him."

"He's dodgin' comp'ny just now. Not gunnin' for it. There's the money 'n' I'll say good day." Reese saw him mount and start toward the southwest with the burro patiently plodding along behind him. He had barely returned to the table when Hoot entered and announced the boys were rarin' to go at cards. Reese said he was ready, and added, "You have some trade out here? I heard a man buying something."

"Fair to middlin'. But mostly in hosses. Feller just here comes from the Big Hole Mountains. Only greenhorns would look for gold there. Placers there in Notch Gulch won't show them one color to a pan. Only gold ever taken out of that gulch was when the Hudson Bay trader used to make a summer trade there with the Injuns when I was a boy. He was killed. Injuns won't go near it now. Say it's a medicine place. Bad medicine at that . . . Now what do you say?"

Reese saw the men at the table and replied, "Cards? I'm in fine fettle for a stiff game. Let's be at it."

With much gusto he took his place with the three Hoots and Kigel and Sas'fras, with the old man acting as banker. After a few hands he decided none of his opponents were up to the Butte standard of poker and had depended on bullying tactics. He refused to be bullied, and outbet and outbluffed the five of them without much effort. Nor did he fail to appreciate the possibility of their being complacent because they believed they would take his gold away from him by other methods. He planned to depart while the sun was high, and at the end of two hours, when he was some seven hundred dollars ahead, he abruptly announced he had had enough and requested Hoot to cash his chips.

The old man was disgruntled and hesitated and suggested he let his winnings remain in the bank until evening, when they would play again.

"I'll carry my own cash until then," he quietly insisted.

Hoot leaned back and thrust his right hand through a slit in his coat, and said, "I'm sure you'll feel better if you let your winnings lay in the bank till the next game."

"Next games never interest me . . . Wonder if any of you have a few drops of oil?" And his hand brought one of Tiger Logan's guns above the table. He examined it and canted his head to listen to the *click-click* as he half cocked it and turned the loaded cylinders. "Maybe it isn't so dry as I'd thought," he added.

"Put that damn thing away!" roared Hoot. "Don't aim it at me!"

"You're mighty nervous. Not used to firearms? My cash, please." And he stressed the demand by gently rapping the long barrel on the edge of the table.

There was a general withdrawal with the exception of Hoot, who counted out the winnings. As he started to push them across the board his eyes dilated, and Reese anticipated his attempt to knock the gun barrel aside by lowering the weapon below the table. Hoot slumped back and swung his head to observe how his followers were posted. All were helpless so long as he was at the table. He made to get up, and the .45 rose above the table, and Reese said:

"Just a minute, Mr. Hoot. I must have a word aside with you." He filled a bag with his winnings and stuffed the remainder into a pocket and with his gun through his belt he linked his left through Hoot's right and led him to the door.

"Hi! What you up to? Thought you wanted to talk?" cried Hoot, beginning to hold back.

"I want your advice on a horse. And keep your hands at your side. Rest of you folks aren't wanted."

"By God! A holdup! Holding up Hootsville!" yelled young Lige, and he started to draw a gun.

"You're going to be dead alongside of your pap in another two seconds," warned Reese as he urged the old man through the door and toward the corner of the building. There was a rush for the windows, but Reese had his living shield.

"Shoot!" cried Kigel at a window.

"Hold your fire, you fools!" bellowed

Hoot. "This little rinktum ain't played out yet."

Reese unhitched his horse. Hoot stepped back a pace and roared, "Now climb into that saddle 'n' be off!"

Reese, with a hand on his gun, relieved his prisoner of knife and gun, and commanded, "You'll walk along with me for a bit. I've left some money on the table for my dinner. We're square . . . You men in the house keep back. Now, Mr. Hoot, step out."

Grinding his teeth and groaning with rage Hoot stalked ahead, the horse walking at their heels. Kigel wanted to shoot, but Abner would not run the risk. He did not believe even a mortal wound could stop Reese from pulling the trigger. The men did, however, leave the house and stood grouped before the door. It was young Lige who suggested they be ready to ride the stranger down once Hoot was released. The moment they scattered, Reese knew what they purposed, but he did not believe they would attack until the head of the clan was freed.

FOR a quarter of a mile Reese forced his captive to accompany him. Then he halted. A horse's head showed at the end of a cabin, but none of the men were in sight. He told Hoot, "If a shot's fired while you're in range I'll drill you."

"Can I go back?" panted Hoot.

Reese answered him by springing into the saddle and galloping away. Hoot ran back to get weapons and screamed for his men to ride after the stranger. The four horsemen erupted from behind the cabins and scattered to attack from four different points. Reese glanced back and watched them string out on a wide front and observed each was superbly mounted.

As it was not his desire to overtake Bloover, or to lead them to Cram's hiding place, Reese swerved to the east and held to a steady pace until Kigel drew up within range and commenced firing. Reining in Reese fired twice, the second shot knocking Kigel from the saddle. Then he was off again, with Abner Hoot taking the lead. Old man Hoot commenced firing from the saloon window, and by the detonation and the vicious *whir* of the lead Reese knew he was using a rifle. He shifted his course to the south so as to bring Abner between him and the saloon. Sas'fras was scurrying

south on his right, and young Hoot was taking the same course on his left. They believed they had him in a pocket and began yelling like Indians.

Reese began to worry. It was the height of irony did these border wolves stop him from pursuing a much more dangerous errand. He wheeled and galloped straight for Abner, who turned to the west. Coming to a plunging halt Reese fired at the horse and scored a hit. The animal gave a convulsive leap and hurled his rider to the ground, where he remained insensible. Lige Hoot was tearing in after Reese, and Sas'fras had turned to take him on the flank. Riding to meet young Hoot he saw Sas'fras wheel to keep abreast of him. He and Lige passed each other at a distance of fifty feet. They fired almost together. Reese's hat jumped. Young Hoot fell on the neck of his horse and dropped his gun. Wheeling to deal with Sas'fras Reese saw him streaking away to the east. As he rode he looked back and saw the tall, angular figure of the old man following him on foot and occasionally trying for a lucky shot with the rifle.

Reese rode south until well within the broken country, when he turned and made for the snow-capped peaks of the Bitter Root Range. His reaction was disagreeable. There was no elation, and he even hoped he had not mortally wounded young Lige, wolf that he was. All were scoundrels, but they were strangers to him. He had not had time to build up personal resentment. His hatred for the Cram outfit was deadly, not because they had planned to cheat him and kill him, if the latter were necessary, but he hated them for the horrible fate they were willing to force upon the Logan girl.

An hour passed with his horse picking his own gait, and he was thinking of making camp when his attention was attracted by several large birds rising on heavy wings and lazily flapping into the pines. As he neared the spot where the scavengers had taken flight his horse snorted and shied violently to avoid stepping on a dead man. Reese stared down on the upturned face. It was Bloover. He had been shot through the head.

"You bloody devil!" Reese apostrophized the slayer. "You're whittling them down with a vengeance. But how will you and Kidd split the pot?"

CHAPTER VI

KIDD SEES GHOSTS

BY THE sheerest chance he had come upon the dead man, the second to mark Cram's flight with the treasure. A slight deviation from his course after his fight with the Hootsville gang would have led him to cut into the Notch Gulch trail farther west. That night as he made a dark camp his mind was much on Annie Logan's prophecy of a curse following Plummer's gold. He slept poorly, hearing wolves howling when awake, and in a dream seeing Henry Plummer standing by his side and staring down upon him through spectral eyes, and grinning sardonically.

At sunrise he searched the ground and found where a horse and burro had entered the trail, coming from the northeast. He also found the rock behind which the murderer had waited, and remnants of a lunch he had eaten. He vividly visualized the scene; the coming of Bloover with the supplies, the shot from the boulder. The cold-bloodedness of the crime, the neglect to bury the body, appalled him. He fashioned a rude grave between boulders and hid the sorry remains with debris. He climbed a tree and studied the broken ground ahead. When he resumed his journey he walked ahead of his horse. He was afoot when he came to a low, bare ridge, studded with boulders. He scarcely had shown his head above the ridge when a gun roared and he stumbled and fell on his side.

"By God, I nailed him! The lyin', cowardly sneak!" shouted Cram. "Now we can sleep in peace. I told you I saw something in that pine back there. You said it was a bear."

Doctor Kidd emerged from behind a rock and joined Cram. He walked slowly, and warily watched the motionless heap on the ridge. "Feel sure you fetched him, Cap'n?" he asked.

"What's the matter with your eyes? There he is. Can't you see where I bored him through the chest?"

Kidd shaded his eyes with his hand and said:

"Reckon you're right. Seems like I can see where he was hit. Mighty clean, quick shooting. Reckon I'll take a shot. Always hankered to pot him."

He threw up his revolver and fired.

The lead struck close, and Reese could

feel the impact of sand and pebbles driven against his body. It happened so quickly he did not have time to betray himself by any motion.

"Satisfied now that I'm the high cock-alorum?" jeered Cram.

"Yes. And never did I see such quick, straight shooting, Cap'n. You handled that big buffalo gun as if it was a derringer. He was barely in sight when you bagged him. I couldn't tell until after he fell if it was him, or one of the Hootsville outfit. I'm might glad it is him instead of one of them. They're just cheap dogs, dangerous only if they can get behind you. This man was poison."

"Better go 'n' fetch his guns," said Cram. "Cinders said he was carrying the Tiger's old irons."

Kidd darted a glance at the heavy rifle in his companion's hands, and said: "The guns didn't save his pelt, nor the Tiger's. Bad luck on them, I reckon. Besides, we've got guns enough. Just how far are we from the gulch? Hate to think of that stuff being left there unguarded."

"Couple of miles. Stuff's as safe as if it was in the moon. No gold there except ours. I was fearin' the Hootsville crowd would tag along after Bloover. Well, we can be going back."

They turned and walked away, keeping side by side. Reese maintained his position. Suddenly both wheeled about and stared back at him. Cram threw up the big gun and fired, and Reese heard a lead shrieking close to his head.

"I hit him ag'in!" yelled Cram. "I admitted, 'That feller got on . . . 's eyes. A little more 'n' I'd been scared of him. Now I can sleep in peace."

"Yes, Cap'n," said Kidd. "As you've remarked once before, you can sleep in peace." And he thrust the muzzle of his gun against Cram's side and fired. With a scream that carried a great distance Cram tried to use the long rifle as a club. Kidd leaped back, his white teeth showing through his snarling lips, and fired twice. Cram crumpled to the ground.

Panting heavily Kidd told the dead man, "You'd cold-deck me, would you? Wanted me to go and fetch Tiger Logan's guns, eh? Oh, yes. Fine! Well, if you meet Cinders, or Bloover, you can tell them who sent you along, and that the doctor wins the pot."

He picked up the rifle and hurled it

among the rocks. Then he dragged Cram's body one side and covered it with small fragments of rock. For one capable of such a cold-blooded crime he appeared to be ill at ease. Several times he wheeled about quickly, as if fearing someone stood behind him. Finally he passed around an enormous boulder.

Reese felt relief and regret. He was thankful Kidd had not practiced on him with the buffalo gun. He was sorry the murderer had not advanced, armed only with a revolver. Not until after he had crawled back to his horse did his nervous tension let down. Scenes of violence were all too common in the gold camps, and he was used to rough men and rough ways. But there was something vastly different between his running fight with the Hoot's gang and the cold-blooded butchery of Cinders and Bloover, and even Cram. The prophecy had proven true thus far, and Reese began to fear the bandit's gold.

IT WAS early morning of the third day that Reese had camped at the mouth of the gulch, hoping that Kidd would come forth. This waiting had worn his nerves raw. Also, there was the sudden fear that Kidd had found a trail over the mountains and had descended into the Beaver Head country.

"Why copy them and practice stealth?" he muttered. "I'll start back for Silver Bow creek by midday, or stay here for all time."

Forty eight hours of watching, relieved by spasmodic bits of sleep, and nearly twenty four hours of fasting, had left him a bit light-headed. He shifted his horse to a fresh patch of grazing. He oiled and re-loaded Tiger Logan's guns. Then, filled with a savage insistence to have done with manhunting, he made for the mouth of the gulch.

Notch Mountain loomed at its head. A stream of ice-cold water chattered among the rocks under the western wall. He kept to the bank of the stream as he was consumed with an unquenchable thirst. Crawling and dodging among the boulders, often wading in the icy water, he worked his way toward a dilapidated log cabin, once a trading post. He practiced stealth while believing he had been seen, that he had glimpsed Kidd's face at a window. He advanced with the expectation of beholding

Kidd peering from behind every boulder and tree. He knew this was not rational thinking and he endeavored to fight against it. He told himself his errand was favored by the early hour, that Kidd would be asleep. Outside the gulch, he knew, the sun was flooding the world. In the long slot between towering walls the shadows were deep, and when he glanced upward he could see the stars. And yet the visibility was good enough for even a long pistol shot. Physically he was steady as a rock.

He had covered half the distance to the cabin before he realized no smoke was rising from the old chimney. This meant one of two things: Dr. Kidd had managed to cross the range, or was still sleeping. In either event speed, not caution, was in order. He ceased his scouting tactics and started to run for the closed door. He was within a few rods of the cabin when a spurt of flame from a sashless window sent him diving behind a boulder.

The report reechoed from wall to wall, and the door swung open and to Reese's amazement Doctor Kidd stepped forth with a gun in each hand.

"Come out into the open, damn you!" shouted Kidd. "Be you Cram, or Cinders, Bloover, or Reese, come into the open."

Reese grinned ferociously as he read hysteria, or greater madness in the man's wild outcries. So Kidd had suffered from his nerves during his period of isolation. He was wearing his shirt and trousers and his hair was disheveled. His face was thin and marked by deep lines. There was nothing of the dandy in his appearance now. He kept jerking his head from side to side as if expecting to behold his Nemesis appearing from behind any cover.

"No damn ghost can scare Doctor Kidd," he shouted. "He never knuckled down to Plummer and he won't knuckle to his ghost."

The walls of the gulch rumbled back his words. Suddenly he wheeled and peered suspiciously into the cabin. Reese advanced to another boulder.

Facing about Kidd yelled, "Come and get it! What are you scared of? Lead can't hurt you. Come and hunt for it!" He laughed wildly and boasted, "I'm the only man on earth who knows where it's hid. Show yourself out there! I saw you. Is it you, Cap'n Cram? You did for Bloover, you did for Cinders, you did for Reese. I

saved my powder and did for you." Then he wheeled as the burros filed by the cabin, making for better grazing outside.

The man appeared to be going mad. Reese did not relish the thought. He had come to shoot it out with Doctor Kidd, not with a crazy man incapable, perhaps, of defending himself.

He rose from behind the rock and called out, "All right. I'm coming."

"Reese!" shouted Kidd, and he laughed as if highly amused, and with amazing celerity sent two bullets which barely missed. Reese advanced. Kidd ceased laughing and brought down a gun. Reese leaped to one side as the gun roared. With a shout Kidd suddenly ran toward him, firing as he came. Reese fired and saw him man lurch violently; yet he kept coming and shooting. Reese whirled half around under the impact of the smashing blow on his shoulder and dropped his left hand gun. Kidd screamed in triumph and came to a halt and got a grip on himself and slowly brought down the gun. Reese fired twice and Kidd plunged forward, discharging his weapon into the ground close to his feet. He endeavored to raise the gun again, and collapsed.

Reese dizzily walked to him and saw he had hit him three times. He made his way into the cabin and found a jug of whisky. He drank a mouthful and poured much over his wounded shoulder. No gold was in the cabin. From a window opening onto the stream he looked down into a whirlpool of black water. A bucket with a rope attached revealed how water could be procured without the tenant leaving the cabin. Reese knew the gold was in the whirlpool.

"Good place for it" His own voice startled him. Carrying the jug he staggered from the cabin, gained the stream and poured out the liquor. Then he filled the jug with water. He came to his horse without knowing how he found him.

Two days later men from Deer Lodge City picked up a man who was reeling in the saddle and talking incoherently. They did not learn his name until they had nursed him back to reason. He told them nothing about the gold. The curse upon it was no respecter of persons, and they had been kind to him. He had had a running fight with some horsethieves, he explained.

"You must 'a' shot most mortal straight," one of his benefactors told him. "It was the Hootsville gang. You certainly busted up that outfit. You did all decent folks a rare service. Now you keep quiet and rest till you're all mended."

Reese walked about to test his strength. He was weak, but he believed he was able to ride. "I had two guns," he said.

"Not when we found you. Now drink some more of this meat broth and sleep."

He drank the broth greedily, and told them, "I'll never forget your kindness. I must ride at once for Silver Bow City. It would be cruelty to keep me here."

WHEN near the Logan cabin he saw her working in a flower bed. He turned in and was quite close before she glanced up and saw him. She ran to help him dismount. She stared at his haggard face and moaned, "Oh, they have treated you cruelly!"

He patted her slim shoulder to still her sobbing, and told her, "They'll treat no other man cruelly. They've gone for good with Plummer's gold. It's finished. I know where it is, but I'll not tell even you. A curse was on it. They killed each other off until only Kidd and I were left. We shot it out. I was hit, but am getting better fast. I lost your father's guns . . . Don't cry . . . I'm going into town and get work. Then I'll come back and talk with you, if I'll be welcome."

"Oh, my dear, my dear! You are so welcome!" she tearfully told him.

"Tales of the Teak Forest"



CUTHBERT

Of Ai See and the Call of the Jungle

By REGINALD CAMPBELL

JOHN HINTON, teak-wallah, blinked in amazement, for news had come to his forest that a traveling circus was shortly arriving at Lakon Lampang, the head of the railway in Northern Siam. Among other advertised attractions, so said Ai See, Hinton's excited boy, was a real live lion, two performing elephants, and a big—ever so big—red monkey. Could he, Ai See, be granted leave to go to Lakon in order to be present at this stupendous event?

There followed deputations to the white man from mahouts, coolies and chainmen, one and all of whom desired to proceed to Lakon forthwith to see the circus, and Hinton, mindful of the coming Lao New Year holidays, and not wishing to disappoint his children, granted them their request. He also, being in need of a rest and a change, decided to travel to Lakon and spend a few days of glorious laziness in the little native town. He therefore gave orders to his excited servants to prepare for an immediate departure from his forest.

Six days later, on a brilliant March morning, he arrived at Lakon where, after

sending his baggage elephants to graze in the green coolness of the surrounding jungle, he put up in the *dak* bungalow attached to the tiny railway station. In this bungalow he found one Mr. Venning also staying, and on inquiry he learned that this gentleman was none other than the joint owner and boss of the circus which had arrived from Bangkok three days ago. Mr. Venning was a large, confiding sort of individual, and after mutual introductions the two men reclined in comfortable rattan chairs, a glass of iced lemon squash at each of their elbows.

"How's business here?" asked Hinton after he had taken a long draught of the tinkling, frothing mixture.

Mr. Venning's mien became very confidential indeed.

"Between you and I," he whispered hoarsely, "my coming up to Lakon has been the best stroke of fortune I've ever had. Only been here three days, but each night we're crowded out, and I reckon from the look of things I'll be at Lakon for a fortnight at least."

"It's a long and expensive journey bring-

ing a circus all the way up here from Bangkok, isn't it?" remarked Hinton somewhat doubtfully.

"It is, but mine's a small circus, see? And in the big towns down south the natives stick up their noses at a small affair, for they're getting a blaze lot nowadays, I can tell you. But here in Lakon I guess the inhabitants are real jungle people, and my show comes as a fair treat for them."

"That's so," agreed Hinton, thinking of the enthusiasm of his own mahouts and coolies.

"Now I know the native mind," went on Mr. Venning. "Show 'em a car, or a wireless set, or a gramophone, and they don't care a damn for it. But show 'em something they already know, like an elephant or a monkey, and they'll come miles to see it. And in that respect they're similar to a white audience; for look how people at home prick up their ears when a horse is led onto the stage. They can see dozens of horses outside on the street at any time of the day, but here's something familiar in an unfamiliar setting, and they fall for it every time. See?"

Hinton saw.

"And what does your show consist of?" he asked at length.

"Well, as I've said before, it ain't a *big* show," admitted the other, "being owned, bossed and run entirely by me, Henry Venning, Esq. I'm the only white man in it, as I can't afford to engage European assistants; they always want too large salaries for my liking. Also I can't afford many animals. I gotta coupla elephants, three white ponies, a lion and an orang I picked up in Borneo. That orang. Hmm!" The speaker paused and scratched himself reflectively.

"Have another squash with a dash of gin in it," prompted Hinton, interested in his new companion.

The drinks brought, Mr. Venning expanded.

"I tell you I was sold a fair pup when I bought that orang, Mr. Hinton," he said aggrievedly. "The previous owner swore it was as tame as a dachshund, and I, being in a hurry and wanting a performing ape of sorts, bought the beast, stuffed it into a cage, and took it along with me. But Cuthbert—that's what we call him—tame? My God, sir, he's as fierce as Hades! There's not one of our assistants

can get near him, so we can't use him in the circus but keep him in a cage outside. Still, he draws the crowd a bit, I'll say that, so I didn't altogether waste my money."

There followed further grievances about the defections of Cuthbert, then Mr. Venning once more remarked on the good fortune that had brought him to Lakon Lampang.

"Well, I wish you every success in your venture," remarked Hinton as the other paused for breath, "but I'd like you to remember that you're among a queer people up here who are very different to the more civilized natives further south. They're a funny, childish lot, the Laos, and one never knows what's going on in their minds; consequently, the unexpected always happens. I think, if you don't mind me saying so, that in future you'd better content yourself with the smaller profits of the big towns instead of going too much off the beaten track."

"Pah," said Venning scornfully, "what could happen up here?"

"That's just what one can't guess, returned Hinton. "Tell me, have you got the cages of the lion and the orang securely locked?"

"Yes, why do you ask?"

"I don't quite know myself, but all the same I'm glad to hear it."

"Now don't get trying to scare me stiff," said Mr. Venning cheerfully. "Anyhow, come and see the show tonight. You'll like it, and it's only two hundred yards away from the bungalow."

THAT evening John Hinton visited the circus, which was held in a large marquee pitched in the center of the broad, dry paddyclods that lay between the town and the station. Not only was the marquee crowded to its utmost capacity, but the fields all round were black with people; for the fame of the circus had echoed for miles, and even from remote jungle villages the dusky Laos were hastening in by their hundreds.

John Hinton, however, in the seat reserved for him by Venning, had an excellent view of the performance, and the more it progressed the more did he marvel. It was a comic show, unbelievable save in the East, where many strange things come to pass, and yet it worked with a smooth-

ness and efficiency that surprised him. The general manager was apparently an Eurasian; the trick-riding and trapeze artists were Japs, and the general attendants seemed to be Malays; nevertheless turn followed turn with a precision that would have done credit to any London circus. There was bareback riding on the plumed and belled, prancing white ponies; there was agile trapeze work done by the lithe, swarthy little Japs; the two performing elephants did a hundred and one mirth-provoking tricks, and clowns tumbled and rolled to the accompaniment of howls of laughter from the delighted audience.

But the hit of the evening was undoubtedly when Rex, the lion, was brought into a large iron enclosure that had been specially erected in the ring. There Mr. Henry Venning, clad in resplendent black tights, lunged at the animal with a thick, wooden stick he carried. The result of this was remarkable; for Rex immediately threw himself into a veritable ecstasy of rage, roaring, biting and clawing at the stick and seeming ever about to attack his master, yet ever just refraining from doing so.

This turn, the final one of the evening, fairly brought down the house, and Hinton as he walked back to the bungalow, was inclined to agree that the circus had rosy prospects for the next few days. Nevertheless his mind remained vaguely uneasy, for he knew something of the strange Lao people among whom he had lived for so long.

THE next morning, as the two white men breakfasted together in the bungalow, Hinton noticed that Ai See, his boy, had a nasty gash across his forehead, and on inquiry learned that the boy possessed a brother who lived in a neighboring village. This brother in turn possessed an ancient, ramshackle bicycle, and on this contraption Ai See had endeavoured to emulate the exploits of the Japs, though—brown hands spread—with a singular lack of success so far.

John Hinton smiled grimly, for he wondered what other news would be brought to him during the day. They soon came, for in the afternoon it was reported to him that his pony boy had well nigh broken his neck through trying

to ride Sunstar, Hinton's best pony, at a terrific gallop while seated the wrong way round in the saddle. An hour later a carrier coolie elected to do trapeze work from the branch of a tree, only to fall and sprain his ankle, and the last straw was added when Hinton went out to visit his baggage elephants, which he had left in the jungle not far from the town. There he found them, mounted by their mahouts, running frantically round in circles, utterly at a loss as to why their riders apparently wished them to swallow each other's tails!

Thereafter John Hinton had to speak somewhat sternly to his simple people, and his words left there mark on all save Ai See, the boy.

Now Ai See, since viewing the circus, had been dreaming the most wonderful dreams, for he saw himself doing marvelous feats with wild animals to the accompaniment of admiring glances from the sloe-black, flashing eyes of the village girls. The elephant tricks were good, of course, and so were the pony ones, but it was the lion act that appealed to him most. There were no lions in Siam, which was a pity, but if he could manage to capture a tiger, for instance, his fame would echo throughout the length and breadth of the land. Still, to do this would require much powerful medicine, and after a good deal of anxious thought he came to the conclusion that the stick which the Lord Venning was wont to carry must be possessed of this medicine. Of a truth it was wonderful, this stick, for could it not throw beasts into most terrible rages, and yet protect its owner from all harm? If only he could get a chance to prove for himself its charms.

The chance came on a stifling hot afternoon two days later. Both Venning and Hinton were asleep in long rattan chairs set in the coolest part of the front veranda of the bungalow, and consequently their rooms, which adjoined one another, were for the moment empty. Ai See, being Hinton's boy and having the run of the building was aware that Mr. Venning, though he used the dressing-room attached to the marquee for changing in, had elected to live in the bungalow as being more comfortable and less liable to danger from thieves. The white man was therefore in the habit of bringing his show regalia

back to his bedroom of nights, and Ai See, knowing this, now tiptoed into the bedroom by the rear entrance and glanced cautiously around.

He found the coveted medicine stick propped up against a chair, and having seized it he crept out again onto the back veranda. There he glanced away over the paddyfields that now danced and shimmered in the blazing afternoon heat. In the center of the fields was the marquee, now deserted, and on its right, under the shade of a large tree, were the cages of the lion and the orang, 'round which Ai See noted with satisfaction large crowds were still surging.

CONCEALING the stick behind him, he fled down the bungalow steps and two minutes later was elbowing his way through the mob. Having arrived at the barrier erected 'round the cages, he peered about for the Malay attendant, to discover that this gentleman, overcome by the stifling atmosphere, was fast asleep with his back against the sheltering tree.

At the sight Ai See's eyes glinted with satisfaction, and next moment he leaped over the barrier and came to a halt directly before the lion's cage. As he did so he felt, rather than heard, a pleased flutter run through the serried ranks of natives behind him, and he swelled visibly at the sensation he was creating.

Undaunted by the close proximity of the king of beasts, he thrust the stick through the bars and poked Rex gently in the ribs. The lion, which up to now had been sunk in profound slumber, opened two mild amber eyes, then closed them again. Ai See gave a second poke, this time a little harder, whereupon the animal, under the impression that was being scratched, rolled slowly over onto its back and stuck up all four feet into the air.

Ai See, though a trifle disappointed, stuck manfully to his task, but completely without avail. Not one roar, not even a growl could he evoke from the lion; once, indeed, a sound did issue from the sleek, tawny throat, but this might have been some queer, leonine giggle provoked by the tickling of the stick.

Soon a titter went through the crowd outside the barrier, and Ai See flushed, for instead of cutting a dash with the Lao maidens he found he was making rather a

fool of himself—which was not to his liking at all.

"Pah!" he said at last. "This lion is no more fierce than a bamboo rat."

"Try the monkey," advised somebody in the crowd.

At the words Ai See started. If he carried out this suggestion the power of the medicine stick would indeed be tested, since from what he had previously seen of the brute he knew that it was as fierce as hell. For a moment he wilted at the prospect, and then, nerving himself, he sidled along inside the barrier till he had come opposite the orang-utang's cage.

Cuthbert for the moment had forsaken his rages for sleep, and was curled up at the back of the cage, a huge reddish-colored ball of latent strength. Ai See quietly pushed his weapon between the bars and then, in order to give the medicine every chance of working, gave the ape a violent prod in the wind.

The medicine worked in a manner beyond his wildest dreams, for next second the ball became a flying, chest-roaring terror that sprang at the bars and shook them till they rattled in their sockets. Ai See, white to the gills, shrank back against the barrier, though the crowd outside surged closer, for here was good business at last.

"Hit him again," said somebody in a voice that was tense with excitement.

Ai See swallowed hard and a sudden yearning for the distant bungalow assailed him, but with an effort he fought it down. After all, the stick would protect him from all danger, and was not he gaining much fame by his bravery? He therefore braced himself and, after taking one pace forward, lunged at the ape again.

Quick as he was, the ape was still quicker, for an enormous hairy arm shot out and grasped the weapon. *Crack!* The stout wood was split in half like a rotten twig, and then Cuthbert, warming to his work, concentrated on the bars once more.

Now possibly the sockets of the cage had become loose owing to the long, rattling journey up from Bangkok, but whether this was so or not the onlookers never knew. All they did know was that, scarce five seconds after the breaking of the stick, two of the stout iron bars were wrenched clean out of their sockets with a splitting crash that made the ear-drums throb. As for Ai See, he was conscious of a huge reddish streak

hurtling through the air towards him, and with commendable promptitude he did a back somersault over the barrier into the crowd behind. Then came a violent blow on the side of his head and oblivion temporarily blotted out his dusky senses . . .

When he came to he staggered to his feet and looked dazedly round him, to behold the Malay attendant running with all his might for the *dak* bungalow, while in the opposite direction the panic-stricken Lao people were streaming away towards the town of Lakon. In the center of the paddy-fields, as if nonplused by its unexpected freedom, the ape was squatting. For a while it plucked with huge, hairy hands at the dried paddy stubble that surrounded it, then it galloped heavily over the fields and disappeared from view into a patch of jungle that walled up in vivid green between the town and the station.

THREE minutes after the departure of the ape, John Hinton and Mr. Henry Venning were standing beside a very subdued and penitent boy.

"Thou art dismissed from my service," said Hinton angrily when he had heard the tale, for the stealing of another white man's property was a serious affair.

Ai See walked off forlornly, then Venning seized his companion's arm: "My God, man," he cried, and his large red countenance was unnaturally pale, "the ape escaped! I'd give pounds for this not to have happened, for he's as fierce as hell, I tell you, as fierce as hell. He might turn man-eater."

"Might turn *man-eater*?" echoed Hinton incredulously.

"Yes. I don't say for sure he will, mind you, but anthropoid apes *have* been known to take to human flesh. Hartmann or any other authority will tell you that. Oh, my God, my God!"

"Well," said Hinton, in a desperate effort to comfort his friend, "you can thank your stars that the lion hasn't escaped as well."

"The lion!" almost shouted the other, "Why, he's as mild as milk and wouldn't hurt a puppy."

"What's that?" exclaimed Hinton, surprised, thinking of the way Rex had growled, lunged and roared at his master in the circus.

"You're thinking of that trick, I suppose. Lord, man, I taught him to be fierce

with that stick. It's like playing with a dog, see? For when you play with a dog, doesn't he sometimes pretend to be devilish fierce? He growls and mouths your hand, though all the time he wouldn't even scratch your skin. Same thing exactly with Rex, but the orang— Oh, my God!"

"If the brute's as fierce as all that," said Hinton, after a pause in which his companion could do nothing but feebly curse, "it's a danger to the community, and must be shot. I've got a rifle. Have you?"

"Yes."

"Then we must hunt for it. I'll inform the gendarmerie of its escape, and they'll probably go out after it as well. Better offer a reward, too, for its capture, alive or dead."

"Do anything you like," moaned Mr. Venning. "Oh, my God, my God!"

THERE followed two days of fruitless searching for the ape, during which time the circus business was at a standstill, for Venning was too worried to perform, and the villagers were afraid to venture out of town after the sun had set. The two white men, together with a posse of Siamese gendarmerie, combed out the jungle in the vicinity of Lakon, but the jungle being limitless and of a density resembling barbed-wire entanglements, Hinton realized that only by the merest chance would the orang be sighted and shot.

On the evening of the third day, however, when he, together with Venning, were sitting down to dinner an hour after dark had fallen, an excited Lao rushed into the bungalow with news that the ape was even now in the market-place of the town. He, the Lao, had been buying some rice cakes, when a strange chesty roar came from somewhere in the darkness behind the stalls, and at the same time the branches of a tall tree overhead had shaken most violently.

Had he actually seen the orang? He had not; he had not waited to see it; nobody had, for one and all of the villagers had fled for their lives into the comparative safety of their huts.

The white men dismissed the Lao, seized their rifles, and hastened over the paddy-field in the direction of the town. Once in the market-place, which though lighted by numerous flares was now entirely deserted, they peered anxiously around. They searched here, there and everywhere, but

no sign of the ape rewarded their straining eyes. Eventually an exclamation came from Hinton, for he had noted that two stalls, one of which had held sugar dainties and the other an assortment of clothing, had been swept well-nigh clean of their contents.

"Does an orang need trousers?" he asked his companion.

"Eh? Trousers?" echoed Venning, mystified.

"A fierce elephant of mine," continued Hinton reflectively, "once broke its hobbles and escaped. But he had part of the hobbles still tied to his feet, and one night some villagers heard the sound of hobbles sweeping over the ground and approaching their market-place. They fled, and a moment later two thieves, after dropping a piece of chain, crept out of the surrounding darkness and helped themselves to the ungarded stalls."

"Hmm," breathed Venning. "So you think the same sort of game's been played on these fellers here."

"Certain of it. And now we'd better go and inform the gendarmerie at once."

Venning's eyes, as he trudged through the scented night towards the police station, were troubled. For a while he walked in silence, and then he spoke:

"Hinton," he said soberly, "you were right. I wish to Heaven I *had* kept to the beaten track, for these natives up here puzzle me. Also—" he hesitated, "I—I'd like to thank you for never saying to me 'I told you so.'"

NOW John Hinton in his supposition that thieves had been the cause of the false alarm, was perfectly correct, for even as he and Venning approached the police station, two dark forms were speeding through the jungle in the direction of their village, situated some two miles north of Lakon.

In their minds was a great satisfaction; in their pockets and mouths a goodly assortment of rice cakes and dainties; in their hands and round their waists was a choice collection of brand-new colored shirts and trousers.

It had all been so simple. On previous visits to the menagerie they had heard the queer, wheezing roar occasionally emitted by the orang; they had heard of its escape; they had practiced that strange, wheezing

roar; then an opportune hour when the town market-place was full, a darkened alleyway, a rope slung over the branch of a tree, a roar, then—hey presto!—the stalls were deserted.

Grinning inwardly, they ran for a full twenty minutes, and then came to an abrupt halt. Instead of arriving back in their own village, they had now come to the bank of a wide, swirling river, upon which the rising moon was gleaming coldly.

"Wooi!" said one. "In our haste have we taken the wrong path, and now we know not where we are."

They squatted on their hams and debated the problem that had suddenly confronted them. To return the way they had come, they dare not, in case they were being pursued. To cross the river was dangerous, for at this point it was rapid and deep, also a distant rumble told them that a waterfall was not far off. Stay on the bank till dawn? No, for were not tigers abroad at this hour of the night? Climb a tree? Yes, but . . . Their hearts tightened in their throats, for did not the orang, fierce, relentless and terrible, climb up trees, *live* in trees?

They glanced fearfully around, then a *mow* owl exploded from a tree near by and flew screeching into the night. Their faces went pale as ashes. They were alone with the terrors of the forest, and all the inbred superstition of the native rose up in them and set their teeth chattering with fright.

They huddled up close together, powerless to think or move. Then a slight, very slight sound came from a tall tree situated directly behind them.

They turned their heads and gazed fearfully upwards. Ah, something was moving in the branches; they could just make out a huge form faintly showing through the whispering, moon-splashed leaves.

The form stirred again, then the foliage lashed as it sprang to a lower branch and hovered almost immediately above them.

The robbers leaped to their feet, screaming. Anyhow, anywhere from this terrible death that threatened! The river! Once on the opposite side they would be safe. And they would return their spoils next morning; they would never commit a robbery again.

Yelling, they rushed into the cold, moon-gleaming water. . . .

THE following morning the two white men were seated at breakfast in the living-room of the *dak* bungalow.

"A police officer—" began Hinton, then he broke off abruptly, for he saw that Venning's jaw had dropped and that the man was staring away over his shoulder in the direction of the door leading to the front veranda.

Hinton screwed round his head and followed the other's gaze, whereupon he too opened his mouth in amazement.

For, standing at the threshold of the room, was Ai See, late boy, hand-in-hand with none other than Cuthbert, wild man of the woods and reputed killer.

A silence followed that could almost be felt, then Ai See spoke in placid tones:

"Lord," he said, addressing Hinton, "here is the monkey. Wherefore do I claim the reward."

"What the devil—" exclaimed Venning, but Hinton motioned him to silence.

"Quiet," he snapped, "and don't make any unexpected movement."

"Lord," continued Ai See, "I will explain."

"By all means," breathed Hinton. "And keep hold of your—er—friend's hand as you do so."

The boy smiled with a flash of white teeth.

"Lord," he began, "things happen like this. At dawn this morning I walk to village at south of Lakon where my brother live, for I wish to see him. As I walk through the forest I very much afraid, for I think of the orang. Then, as I go through clearing, I hear a noise and see the monkey climb quickly down a tree and come towards me. Lord, I even more afraid. I cannot think, I cannot run, I cannot walk. I stick, so."

The speaker paused, and his hearers inwardly sympathized with him, for they themselves were feeling rather like "sticking" at the moment.

Cuthbert, however, remained absolutely quiet, seeming well content with his new-found friend, and the boy went on:

"He come right up to me, but I still stick. But now he not look angry, for he make no noise. Then he put hand in my pocket. I have rice cake in it, and he eat it, so I am glad, for it might have been me instead. I stay quite still, ever so still, then he take my hand and I not afraid so much. I

think perhaps he lonely and hungry, so I begin walking back to Lakon. He come quite quiet with me, so we here now, Lord."

Another silence reigned in the little room, then a queer expression flitted over Mr. Venning's countenance and rising, he seized a large bunch of bananas from the table and fearlessly approached Cuthbert. Cuthbert, showing no trace of hostility, accepted the gift, which disappeared speedily. As the last skin was thrown away, Venning gently took one huge, hairy hand and led the ape round to the seat he had himself vacated.

There the ape sat down to table and with commendable manners placed Venning's table napkin 'round a portion of its enormous barrel-like chest.

"I've had some strange breakfasts in my time," observed Hinton as he eyed his new vis-à-vis, "but this one beats the lot."

Venning laughed, then smacked his thigh. "I've got it," he cried excitedly, "I've got it."

"Got what?"

"The reason for the trouble I've had with old Cuthbert. Lord, what a fool I've been never to have thought of it before! It's that damned cage that's been the cause of all the bother."

"How's that?" asked Hinton, hastily rescuing his coffee cup from an enormous paw that had shot across the table.

"Cuthbert's last owner," explained Venning, "used to keep him on a long chain tied to a pole in the open air, and I doubt if he'd ever been in a small cage before. It was my putting him in one got the old chap all wrong and made him fly into those rages."

"Shouldn't have thought that would be the only reason," demurred the other.

"But it is," returned Venning, "I'm certain of it. Come to think of it, I've heard of similar cases before in other circuses. There was one lion, I remember, who'd been accustomed to a cage of a certain size, and if he was put in one even a foot smaller than the one he liked he'd give everybody hell."

The speaker turned and addressed Cuthbert.

"Cuthbert, old man, you're finished with that cage, see? You can have the run of my tent, and when you've got to travel I'll have a special big cage made for you. Understand?"

For answer Cuthbert broke open a tin of

condensed milk and drank to his new-found freedom.

Ai See, the boy, having been temporarily forgotten by the others, fidgeted uneasily.

"Lord," he said at last, "can I return to your service, for have I not found the monkey?"

"You can," said Hinton after a pause. "Nevertheless as thou wert responsible for the ape escaping, no reward shall be thine."

"As the Lord wills," said the boy, taking his departure for the cook house.

Mr. Venning stretched out a hand to Hinton.

"All's well that ends well," he said heartily, "but I guess I'll take your advice and clear out of here tomorrow. And you'll go back to your forest, I suppose."

Hinton nodded.

"Pity those robbers weren't bagged, though," breathed the other pensively.

"Then I wouldn't have any regrets."

"The robbers are dead," said Hinton quietly.

"Dead," echoed the other aghast.

"Yes. I was going to tell you about them when we sat down to breakfast, but the entry of Cuthbert interrupted me. A police officer, as I was about to say, came to me an hour ago with news that the bodies of

the thieves had been washed up below some bad rapids in one of the rivers to the north of Lakon."

"Good God!"

"It was known that they were the robbers because some of the stolen garments were still wrapped round their waists, and when they had been identified the police recognized them as being scoundrels on whom they had had their eye for a very long time indeed."

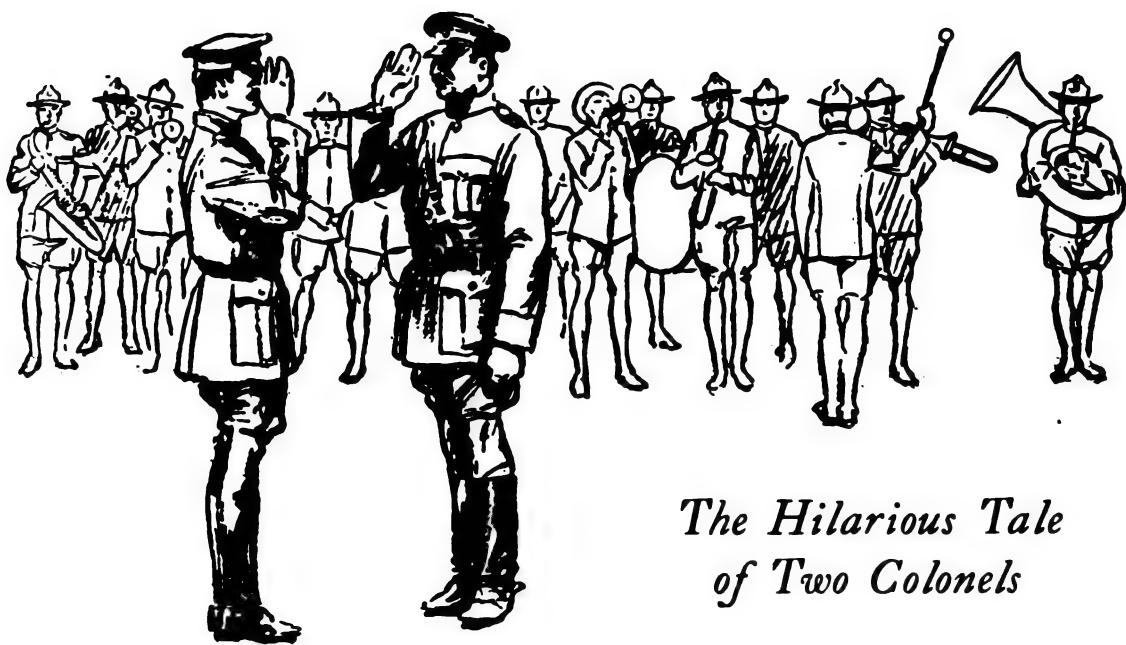
"Snakes!" breathed Venning thoughtfully. "I wonder how they came to be drowned."

"That's what the police can't understand, for footprints were found on the bank above the rapids which showed that the men had entered the water in a place they knew must have been dangerous. Personally, I think they must have become frightened at something and lost their heads."

"Hmm," said Venning thoughtfully, "I wonder what that something was."

But he never knew. Only a harmless, inquisitive brown bear that, attracted by the smell of dainties and the sight of two strange forms squatting on the ground, had decided to investigate, could have told him. But the brown bear was too busy hunting for the wild bees' honey that it loved.

A new and thrilling story of the Malay lands, "Gun Cargo," by MURRAY LEINSTER, will appear in the July issue. It is a long novelette of Sumatra, where the fierce and cruel hillmen of Achin have lurked in the jungles unsubdued for generations.



*The Hilarious Tale
of Two Colonels*

THE MUSIC OF THE STARS

By

FAIRFAX DOWNEY

UPON the countenances of the two martial figures approaching each other from opposite corners of Camp Sickles, feeder for the A. E. F., were deeply pained expressions, and in their ears was a fearful ringing which they would gladly have exchanged for the din of battle. Both the converging colonels had been hearkening to their regimental bands at practice.

Meeting, Colonel Garry McCork of the 416th Field Artillery made a compulsory allotment of a salute to Colonel Horace Arkwright of the 415th who ranked him by a few files. It was probably one of the most reluctant salutes ever tendered in the Army.

"How are you, Arkwright?" greeted the short but dashing McCork as off-handedly as possible stroking his dragoon's mustache.

"I am well, thank you," replied the tall Arkwright precisely, with the wintery smile of a mathematician. "I trust you, too, are in health."

"As fit as usual," McCork breezed. "Guess I'll be ready for a retiring board—" the cold eyes of Arkwright gleamed so

brightly that it was as if he had interrupted with a spoken word "—in about twenty years," McCork finished, grinning.

"A man never knows," Arkwright deprecated. "Look at our poor General Doyle."

"A fine old fellow," the other declared. "But there's nothing like knowing when you're through. Now he had his heart set on taking the brigade over, but I doubt if he'll argue with the board."

"I'm afraid he can't," the senior colonel sighed.

The pair wept a few crocodile tears. But even that temporary accord was not to endure. An orderly approached and saluted McCork.

"Sir, the acting band leader requests the commanding officer's permission to cease practice for the day."

At that, Colonel Garry McCork figuratively transferred to the Air Service. It was ten minutes before he came down and then it was a forced landing. His language would have made a machine gun burst sound like a dollar bill dropped into a velvet-lined collection plate. He dismissed the gasping orderly with this:

"Tell the acting band leader of that gang of steamfitters, *no!* Tell him they sound like a cross between a dog fight and a coloratura soprano with a cold in her head. Tell him they remind me of a flock of damned souls testing out the echoes in a brass-lined hell. My orders are, practice will continue. All day, every day. If any of those alleged musicians get tired, they can report to the stable sergeant and learn how to play an unfinished symphony on a currycomb!"

The colonel took breath and the orderly took flight. Upon the scholarly visage of Colonel Arkwright was a smile as of one who has been handed the degree of Ph. D. or more exactly, of B. G. (Brigadier-General).

Colonel McCork bit his lips. He had talked too much.

"I take it you are having some little difficulty with your band," Arkwright remarked suavely.

"A trifle, a trifle," McCork had to admit gruffly. "But practice makes perfect."

"If you had something to work with," was the smooth answer, as they parted.

Neither the professorial Colonel Arkwright nor the dashing Colonel McCork was animated by a strong love of music, but they knew what they recently had heard was not that and each was determined that the sounds emitted by their bands must needs more closely resemble it and without delay. The outfits which each had hewed out of exceedingly raw material into something that looked and acted more or less like field artillery must have no blots on their 'scutcheons. No, not even a stave of flat notes rampant.

Duty, efficiency demanded it. Brigadier-General Doyle also demanded it, as the vying colonels of his two light artillery regiments had recently learned. Who would not strive to please his general when the brigade was on the eve of sailing for France? Who would not endeavor to delight that commander when the poor old chap was about to come before a retiring board and might be expected to recommend a successor to take the brigade? Certainly neither Colonel McCork nor Colonel Arkwright would be so remiss.

The now diverging colonels headed for their quarters and felt as if they were completing a fairish hike. Each had moved his band a mile farther away from camp

after hearing the thing blare in action.

But Arkwright's chest was swelling with anticipated triumph. Its owner ranked. He knew that his regiment could stand up beside McCork's.

They both had done highly creditable jobs in the frenzied preparation for the A. E. F. and there was little to choose between them—little except the bands. Though Arkwright's was bad, he was reliably informed that McCork's windjamming aggregation was worse. It might be just that difference which would bring the coveted brigadier's stars down on his shoulders, with General Doyle as fond of music as he was.

The keen brain of the C. O. of the 415th F. A. clicked ahead like clockwork and from his lofty brow a plan sprang full-panoplied and tooting a pæan on an issue band instrument.

Before Colonel Garry McCork had reached the headquarters of the 416th F. A. he felt better, but only slightly. He had found a cigaret butt unpoliced outside of barracks and he had discerned a second lieutenant with a tunic pocket unbuttoned. The taking of the necessary disciplinary measures had relieved him. But it was a discouraged and half hopeless regimental commander who at last approached his own quarters.

Somebody was whistling inside. His striker, Martinelli. The swish of blacking brush on boots was heard in cadence. Upon the gray matter of Colonel McCork was forced the realization that it was really very superior whistling. It ceased to jar on his mood; one striker had been rescued from imminent wrath. There was a grand swing to the tune, a military march, and what trills and variations!

"Well, I'm damned!" the Colonel swore. "Or maybe I'm not so damned. I bet that's a musician!"

The whistling broke off suddenly, as he strode into his headquarters.

RIVAL field artillery regiments have their bones of contention and by that is not meant the dotted variety that scamper about on an O. D. blanket on pay day. The chiefest bones of contention are the frame for several square yards of hide, a hank of mane and tail—the horses. A draft from the remount station in which several outfits are to share may

cause all but murder in the selection of quotas therefrom.

The 415th and 416th Field had no quarrel over steeds as yet. They were to draw new mounts in France. It was over recruits.

When the last batch which was to fill the regiments up to strength came in, it appeared to contain nothing to fight over. You might have expected a bored sergeant from each regiment to have regarded the eight squads of bedraggled civilians with open and lofty scorn, each count off his allotted number haphazardly and march them profanely and immediately to the several kitchen police details.

Not so this time. Under orders from his colonel, a sergeant asked each recruit a question, tossed for first choice and pounced on the few rookies who had answered yes.

The question was: "Can you play any musical instrument?"

The 415th fared well. Colonel Arkwright rubbed his hands together over the accession of an amateur clarinetist and an honest-to-goodness tuba player.

A smug smile was not absent from the face of the other sergeant who marched his choices to Colonel McCork's headquarters.

"Broke even, sir," he reported. "They got two and we got two."

"Good," his formidable chief pronounced cordially. "Bring in our two musicians."

The nervous chill of the two skinny rookies who appeared was thawed by majestic welcome of the master of their fates. One of them wanted to shake hands.

"These are the two you chose, Sergeant Marks?" the Colonel beamed.

"Yes, sir," the non-com snapped out proudly.

"And what musical instrument do you play?" the commander inquired of one.

The man shuffled his feet and smirked.

"Since you asks me, Colonel," he confessed. "Folks says I'm a whizz on the harmonicker."

McCork's teeth clicked shut like a breech block and his complexion became slowly suffused with red. With an effort, he put the question to the second recruit:

"And what do you play?"

As if from a great distance, a tiny, trembling voice replied:

"Sir, the Jew's-harp."

An awful pause, a mighty inward struggle and the colonel's voice roared:

"*Private Marks, march these men away!*"

THE story went the rounds of Camp Sickles. His regimental surgeon feared for the state of Colonel McCork's blood vessels, but the wrath of that warrior was manifested only by occasional twitchings of the dragoon mustache. He remained otherwise calm, although the men of the two regiments had sensed the rivalry between their bands and adopted it. He had kept to himself the knowledge of General Doyle's probable exit and the influence of a good band might bring to bear on the recommendation of a new brigadier, and he was sure Arkwright had done the same.

This calm made speculation rife. The B. G.'s aide declared that he understood that music had charms to soothe the savage breast, but from what he had heard of Colonel McCork's band, the colonel must have taken some other sedative. What it was, nobody knew. The glamour of mystery had spread its mantle over the McCorkian musicians. It was common knowledge that the Arkwright aggregation was improving rapidly; men had been known even to go and listen to them play. But nobody heard the strivings of the band of the 416th. It was as secluded as a nunnery. A specially detailed lieutenant warned away any who approached the distant shack of practice.

Two clues only to the mystery had been discovered. The members of the secreted band were pale and wan as so many galley slaves kept day and night at the oars. And the amazing fact had leaked out that the band was now led by a wop, one Martinelli, former dog-robber for Colonel McCork.

But the publicity of the 415th's band dispelled the mystery, as it were by the fury of its blast. It blew no harder, though, than its comrades in the ranks proudly blew about it. They were not long in becoming insufferable to the taunted soldiers of the 416th.

Sailing orders had been postponed, which always irked an outfit until it got used to it. The 416th, finding that Germans were not to be fought in the near future, was put in mind of the annoying 415th as a happy substitute.

The spark was the announcement of a concert by the band of Colonel Arkwright's trusty 415th. It might have been a very nice concert if it had ever come off, but there were insuperable obstacles in the way.

When the 415th's band took up its instruments, the hose was found to have been turned on the drums. There was tobacco on the clarinet reeds and red pepper in the cornets. Some villain had put slow molasses in the slide trombones and snuff in the tubas. It was perhaps as dirty work as ever had been seen at any crossroads.

Coughing, sneezing, spitting and swearing, the band of the 415th led the rest of the regiment in an informal call on the barracks of the 416th. It was a wild night. When it was over, both regiments had decided to date their war service chevrons from then on.

Colonel Arkwright pressed no charges. It would have been difficult to prove anything and, taking it all in all, the affair had been whole-heartedly mutual. He placed his band instruments under guard and put through the last arrangements for that crafty full-panoplied plan of his.

On the evening following the morning the B. G. appeared before the retiring board, the band of the 415th Field Artillery was to serenade General Doyle by order of Colonel Arkwright.

WHEN twilight was gathering, Colonel Horace Arkwright described an arc toward the quarters of Brigadier General Doyle. None knew better than the colonel that a straight line is the shortest distance between two points, but he was early and he wished to arrive for his call punctually just fifteen minutes before the appearance of his band for the long-planned evening serenade.

The arc was of great exactitude; the Colonel might have been one leg of a compass. Just as he was about to drop a tangent and bisect the angle toward his destination, his way was unhappily blocked by Colonel Garry McCork.

That officer and gentleman was arrayed in a new uniform which was military plus. One look at it and almost any sentry would have bellowed: "Turn out the guard. Commanding general!" Arkwright was not glad to see him. He had hoped for a private chat with the brigadier on what action the retiring board had taken that

morning, information which was not yet ripe even as an outbuilding rumor. But McCork was not to be shaken off. He announced he purposed a call on the general also. Let him taste the bitter of the Arkwright band and mayhap the Arkwright personal triumph thereafter. And let him now be baited.

"Well, McCork, how's that band of yours progressing?" Arkwright quizzed him. He talked like a professor giving out an unpassable examination. "Tolerably, Arkwright, tolerably," McCork responded, tweaking his mustache.

"I am informed it is now being led by one of your chief mechanics or your striker or someone." This with the ghost of a wicked twinkle in the eye.

"True enough," came the admission. "By my former striker." The McCorkian mustache began to twitch jubilantly. "The man's name is Nera."

"Not Ne— I had heard another name. Not——"

Arkwright, the imperturbable, was in strange confusion.

"Yes," McCork almost sang. "The noted young band leader. You may recall that he left the concert stage suddenly. Unfortunate love affair. Enlisted under another name. Never wanted to hear music again. Heard him whistling in my quarters one day and found out his secret. Persuaded him."

Arkwright's face fell like a wheel horse on an icy hill. He was speechless.

"I must say he's done wonders with my windjammers," McCork chortled. "Wait till you hear 'em."

Arkwright did not have long to wait. As his own band came into view marching on the general's quarters from the east, the band of the 416th advanced from the west. That villain McCork was literally and figuratively horning in on his privately planned serenade.

Nothing could be done. General Doyle came out, highly pleased.

"Ah, gentlemen," he smiled benignly. "How did you discover my fondness for music? In the exigencies of the training of your regiments—I compliment you both on their efficiency—I had postponed attention to your bands. And now I am to hear them. Colonel Arkwright, Colonel McCork, I am delighted!"

The two colonels bowed. Poker faces

enabled them to hide the glare of the one and the grin of the other.

"Highly important, gentlemen," the B. G. pronounced. "Music and morale. Morale and music. By Jove, yes!"

The old fellow's smile seemed no brighter to his two regimental commanders than the stars which shone on his shoulder straps. A poetic mind-reader would thus have translated the thoughts of both:

*Twinkle, twinkle, stars (B. G.)
How I wonder where you'll be!*

Colonel Arkwright's band rendered a serenade most creditably. It came the turn of Bandleader Nera, alias Martinelli. That talented person raised his baton and led his much-practiced men in Colonel McCork's favorite selection, "The Sunshine of Your Smile." The colonel suited the action to the word. It was surprisingly well played. Nera had brought order out of chaos, had hewed harmony out of discord, had converted into fair musicians a gang of note assassins.

Arkwright gnashed his teeth, but ceased when his band played a piece with a solo full of *esprit du cornet*. They had it back and forth, did those two bands and strove as mightily as if they had known that one of their colonels might gain a generalcy, thus delivering one or the other from a merciless taskmaster.

IT SEEMED that the B. G. never would get enough. He fairly glowed with appreciation. At length he rose to his feet and commanded:

"Now, gentlemen, I suggest that you unite your bands in that grand old march of Sousa's. 'The Stars Forever,' isn't it? No, 'The Stars and Stripes Forever.'"

McCork and Arkwright could do nothing but give the order. They had noticed how the B. G.'s eyes had turned from one to the other, as if determining on whom his mantle should fall. Now they must pool their resources. At any rate, he solved the problem of which band would get in the last tune.

Nera took the baton preemptorily. The bands crashed into the stirring march with abandon. They put all the wind they had

into it. The cornets got red in the face. The eyes of the clarinets gave every evidence of popping out like a burst of shrapnel. The trombones pumped away like piston rods. When the tubas hit their solo part in the middle, they went wild blasting and oom-pahing and Nera egged them on. For the last movement of the march, he snatched a piccolo out of his pocket and hushing the bands down with a look full of Italian frenzy which meant death if disobeyed, he swung into that wicked little obligato of a piccolo part which has driven whole families crazy with enthusiasm. Then they went into the home stretch and the drummers laid down such a terrific barrage that every echo on their front was a casualty.

The artillerymen who had gathered around leaped up into the air and cheered for ten minutes, after which they helped the limp bands back to barracks. General Doyle had barely maintained his dignity. He choked off a yell and restrained himself to applause. His white hair was tousled, his chest was grandly expanded and he looked ten years younger.

He clapped both his colonels on the back. "Splendid, splendid!" he praised. "Gentlemen, that thrilling music has made a decision for me. This morning I came before a retiring board. They passed me as fit but left the decision of retirement to me. My age has influenced me to step out, but, gentlemen, that music has made me feel like a boy! We will make a real record with this outfit of ours in France!"

Colonels Arkwright and McCork took their departure together. There was perceptibly less precision on the countenance of the former, less dash in the mustached visage of the latter.

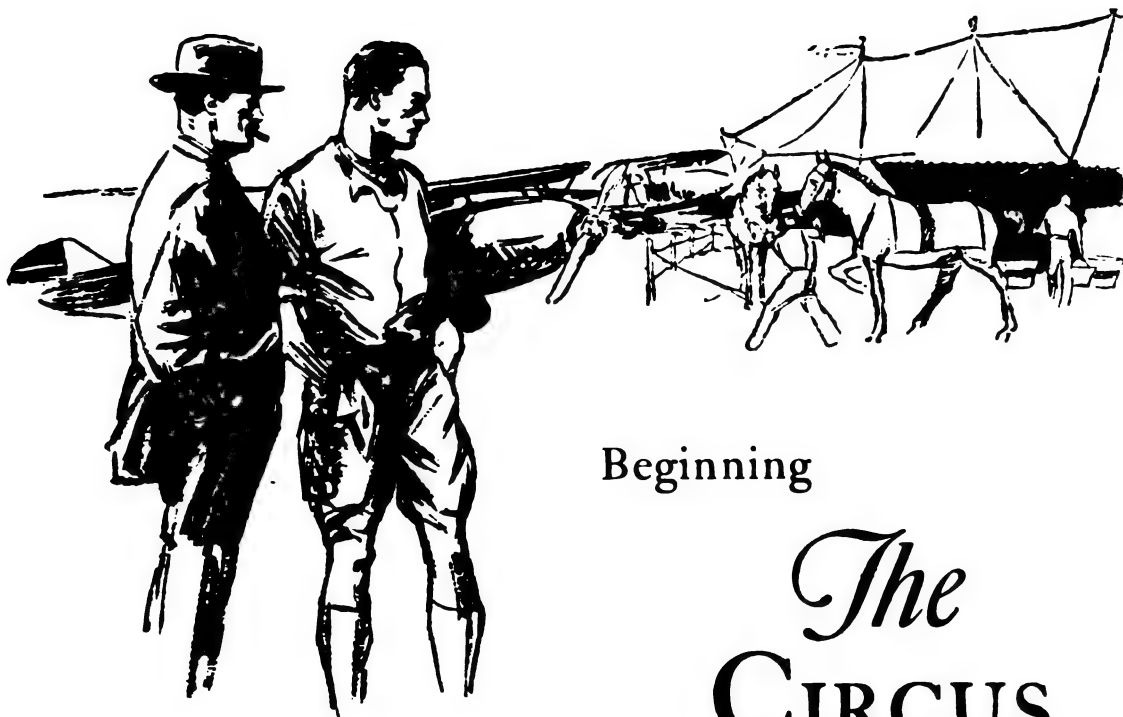
"Ark, what are you going to do with that band of yours when we get to France?" McCork spoke suddenly.

"I believe," his comrade answered with unwonted warmth, "I believe they will be of service for grooming at the horse lines."

He glanced toward his fellow colonel. "And what will you make of your band, Mac?"

McCork snorted loudly through his mustache.

"Stretcher bearers!" he decreed.



CHAPTER I

THE TROUBLE SHOOTERS

EX-LIEUTENANT George Groody, formerly of the Army Air Service, laid down the bulky, gaudily colored magazine from which he had been reading aloud, and inserted a cigar as long and thin as himself in one corner of his mouth.

"It looks to me, Thomas my boy, as though this circus stunt might prove to be the manna from heaven which our virtues deserve," he stated.

The short, stocky, bespectacled young man who occupied the adjoining chair peered around the hotel lobby.

"That particular circus, or just any circus?" he inquired.

Groody's saturnine face grew even more so, if that was possible, as he hunched down further in his chair and threw one leg over the other.

"This oil game ruined a good sleuth," he said sadly. "Of course, any big circus would be a chance for us, but this particular outfit is at least a three to one better bet than any other."

"Why?" inquired Mr. Thomas Service, formerly of the Army Intelligence Section, and later of the Secret Service.

"In the first place, it's the second largest

Beginning

The CIRCUS FLYERS

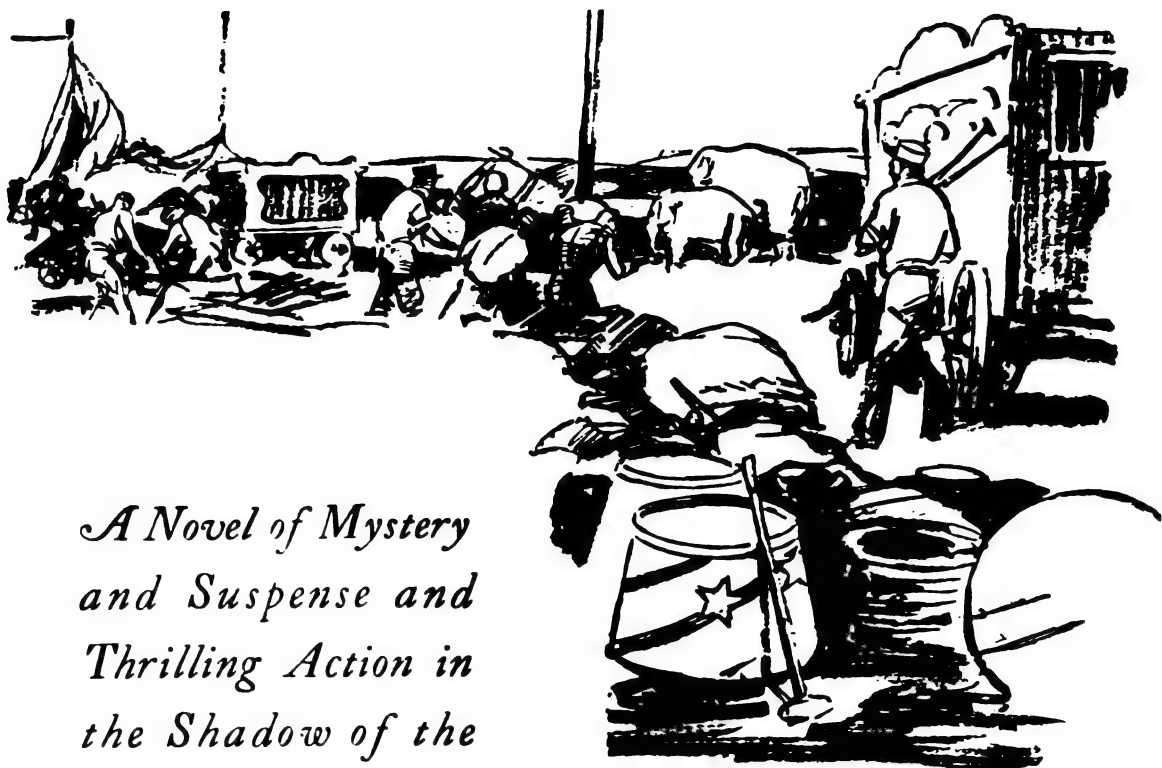
By

THOMSON BURTIS

circus in the world, according to the *Billboard* here, which should know. That means that they could afford regular money, if any show could. In the second place, they're doing rotten business, according to the same authority. And in the third place, these disasters which have been dogging 'em, according to the public prints of the show business, ought to give a talking point for our peculiar talents. Mine being the ability to fly, and yours the supposed ability to track down anything whatever of a criminal nature."

This oracular series of sentences was uttered in the lanky Groody's customary mockingly erudite manner. Backed by his somewhat arresting countenance, they invariably gave Tom Service a kick of no mean dimensions.

He glanced at his friend now, and his full face grew rounder as he permitted himself a smile. Groody was surveying the thronged hotel lobby absently, and his profile was visible to Service. A hawklike



*A Novel of Mystery
and Suspense and
Thrilling Action in
the Shadow of the
Big Top*

*By the Author of
"The Air Rangers"*

nose swept forward over a thin mouth which drooped sardonically. The lean face was tanned to a real mahogany tint, from which a pair of long, sloping gray eyes looked out at the world with a kind of reckless laughter in them. Two lines swept downward from thin nostrils to his mouth, but one line, on the left, abandoned a straight course and curved outward and downward around the lips. It gave his face a curiously one-sided appearance—and when that sweeping line deepened in the suggestion of a smile, it made the tall, rangy ex-flyer's countenance resemble the face of Mephistopheles himself.

"I see what you mean," Tom nodded at length. "And it sure looks as though we'd have to make a hundred thousand someway. Unless we finally decide to let somebody in on the profits."

"Which'd be foolish, if there's any other way to do it," Groody told him. "We agreed on that. Inasmuch as we can't negotiate a straight loan, we've got to try to

make the money. I'll be damned if I want to shoot a million in profits for the sake of a hundred thousand in cash, unless I have to. And Matt Downs would have three kinds of a fit before exploding."

This big money, mentioned so casually on the part of two impeccably dressed but unmistakably outdoor men in the lobby of a Chicago hotel, was not idle chatter. For nearly a year the two had been in the oil fields, in partnership with three friends: one flyer, one ex-politician, and one Texan who was an experienced oil operator.

And they'd made money—plenty of it. But it was reinvested in a new field which they were developing themselves; and with five wells going down at around \$20,000 a well, and a great many thousands of dollars invested in acreage, and many thousands more due on options which they'd taken, the time had come when the company had to have more capital to carry on. And prospects were so excellent that they hated to raise that capital by paying a share in the profits for it. Either a straight loan at high interest, or earning the money if possible, was on their minds.

"Not being a financier," Service remarked in his gentle, hesitant way, "a hundred thousand looks like an impossibility for us. I think we——"

"Are crazy, under ordinary circum-

stances," nodded Groody. "But you know this show business angle. There's big money there. It's just a chance. And if we could, by any chance, just shoot a thousand a week down to the boys in Texas——"

"How the hell are we going to make a thousand a week?" queried the round eyed, chunky Service, who looked like a fat, vapid youth in his early twenties.

"I've just generated an idea while sitting here," Groody announced spacioously. "If you agree, we'll hop a train for this town as soon as we can get home. Thank God it's only a nap trip, and not a sleeper jump."

"What is the idea?" inquired Service. "Or maybe I'm not supposed to know."

"I'll let you in on it," Groody told him, and proceeded to enunciate it.

Service listened quietly. Not a muscle in his big-barreled body moved, and his round, horn-rimmed glasses made him look more solemn, even, than his expression would warrant, which was solemn and vacuous enough.

Service and Groody had been friends for more than ten years, and together they had literally roamed the earth. Tom was a millionaire's son who had left home and the perquisites thereof to see what he could see. A college graduate who was a mental marvel, he could speak five languages fluently and swear in several more. At the outbreak of the war he and Groody had split—Groody to the Foreign Legion, whence he graduated into the French and in 1917 the American Air Service, and Tom back to his dying mother's side. When America entered the soirée, Tom had been free to go, and before long, due to his linguistic facility, found himself in the Army Intelligence Department. Shortly thereafter the round faced, deceiving young man was a major, plying his trade all over Europe and amassing a record for himself which only the archives of the War Department could completely relate. After the war he remained a secret agent for a while, until Groody resigned from the flying corps, joined him, helped him do a last job, and then started out with him to do what they'd done before—roam the earth for excitement. It had lead them to the oil fields, and the oil fields had landed them in Chicago on a search for a hundred thousand dollars to be loaned on some of the best looking oil acreage in the mid-continent fields.

That was the stout looking young man with the short, blond pompadour, whose voice was so gentle, and in whose speech was a slight impediment which caused him to stammer, every once in so often, in a guileless and simple manner. Groody knew him as one whose mental processes were so clear and precise that they left the ordinary man helpless; whose physical being which looked so unimpressive was actually a hundred and eighty pounds of dynamite which was wont to explode in the face of any opponent and swiftly blow him into unconsciousness. Tom was unquestionably the most terrible rough-and-tumble fighter Groody had ever seen. He'd proved it from Canton to Cairo.

"Well, George," Service said hesitantly, "it might go. And there's money there. But there's likewise a wonderful chance for you to break that rubber neck of yours."

"Very little," Groody told him. "And money coming in by fistfuls. We'd get Corrigan up here, leave Shannon and Matt to handle the stuff down there, I'll find myself another guy I know is a bang-up pilot, if necessary—and we see what we can do. No harm in trying, anyway. What say, Sir Thomas?"

"No harm in trying, 'as you say," Service said gently. "Maybe they can use me in the sideshow."

CHAPTER II

TWO THOUSAND A DAY

FIVE hours later a tall, bronzed chap of thirty-five or so, dressed in a suit of clothes which draped his six-foot-two body in an expensively careless manner, made his way through the surging crowd which centered around the entrance to the circus grounds. The matinée performance was half over, but the sideshow, on the right as he entered with his short companion, was still doing a good business and the midway was crowded.

"Look at dried up Foxy Grandpa!" Groody chuckled, and pointed to the sideshow platform.

They stopped to watch. A seven piece negro band had been blaring away like mad while a big man with a walrus mustache, dressed in a turban and wide red pants, had been spinning a gun. Behind him a dried up little old man with a closely

cropped gray mustache, twinkling eyeglasses, and a shrewd, whimsical expression, smoked a cigar and leaned on a cane.

As the band stopped, five of them disappeared into the sideshow tent, and the gun twirler left the platform.

"Now ladies and gentlemen," started the old man in a winning manner, "we have here the greatest sideshow in the world. Twenty-three separate and distinct attractions. We guarantee everything that you see painted on these banners which garnish the front of our show.

"We guarantee everything you see on this side——"

He paused, left arm outflung at the long line of screaming colored pictures which were spread, two high, along the entire front of the sideshow tent. The ticket seller on that side flung out his arm and said in a deep voice:

"All of these!"

"And everything you see on this side!"

His other arm pointed to the right half of the banners. The ticket seller there flung out his arm.

"All of this!" he assured the crowd earnestly.

Groody's mouth widened. The old man, his panama hat down over his twinkling glasses, went into an ecstatic peroration, a speech impregnated with such fatherly sincerity that it was impressive even to Groody and Service. As he closed in a burst of fervid promises Groody's eyes shifted to the ticket taker in at the door of the big hundred-and-twenty foot tent.

When the last word dropped like a priceless jewel from the old man's mouth the two horns left behind the platform burst into a last chord. And the ticket seller, behind his hand, yelled into the tent:

"Smack it!"

The band within obediently smacked it. Wild music reached the crowd. A few canvasmen who weren't sleepy, acting as "shills", faked buying tickets and went in. Others pushed the crowd forward. The ticket sellers on their boxes pled passionately. A concerted movement started, and for the moment a wild desire to see the twenty-three separate and distinct attractions held the crowd in its grip.

"Smoother than the Levin-Willet Greater Show used to do it," grinned Groody. "Tom, the sawdust is driving me wild!"

Tom smiled his vacuous smile.

"This is a bigger proposition," he admitted, surveying the lot with interest. The entrance was directly ahead, and led into the three hundred foot menagerie tent. Several hundred feet to the left of the midway, half hidden by the candy stands and dog-joints which faced the sideshow, a huge cook tent could be seen. To the right of the menagerie tent, paralleling it, the vast canopy of the big top itself billowed slightly in the prairie breeze.

"I presume the bosses are standing around there in the entrance," Groody went on. "We might as well start at the top, and see this bird Musselman. He's the one that the owner sent on to try to fix things up, so I suppose he's got more to say than the manager."

Tom nodded.

"Let's go," he said, and they made their way through the idlers who can always be found around a show from the time it's set up until the last wagon is off the lot in the early morning.

A GROUP of men, a majority of them coatless and with vests hanging open, were standing around the marquee which led into the menagerie top. As Groody, walking with his characteristic longlegged, bent kneed stride, started through one of the lanes made by squares of iron pipe, a red-coated and capped ticket taker appeared from nowhere and held out his hand for a ticket.

"I want to see Mr. Musselman," Groody told him, removing the long, thin cigar which jutted from a corner of his mouth.

"Mr. Musselman!" called the lean, genial faced ticket man, and one of the two men who wore coats detached himself from the group and came toward them.

"How about getting out of this alley?" inquired Groody. "I'm not trying to crash the gate, and we'd like to talk to you privately."

"Come in," invited Musselman, and led them to one side, just inside the gates.

The other men did not notice the two strangers at all, but talked quietly. Their faces, Groody noticed, showed traces of worry and sleeplessness, and there was no laughter.

"What do you want?" Musselman asked directly.

He was a rather stout man, slightly above middle height, with a strong, dark face and

thick black hair. His large dark eyes were rather prominent, and the lines in his face were deep. Heavy black brows were split by what seemed a permanent wrinkle. It gave his face a perpetual frown. He had the look of a man who had eaten and drunk well. He was rather comely in a dark, middle aged way, and his soft white shirt and tan gabardine suit were neat and fresh. He was the sort of man, Groody decided, who in Chicago would be dressed to perfection and fit in any surroundings. Likewise his jaw was square, and the impression he made was that of a man of force and character.

"My name's Groody—George Groody," the flyer told him, and thrust a lean, brown hand toward the showman. "This is Thomas Service."

As Musselman shook hands his bulging black eyes were traveling over the two strangers in cold appraisal. As he repeated their names the watchful Groody thought he could catch a certain mystification, a half recognition. Which, if so, would help.

The blare of the big band within the big top gave way to the strains of a calliope. The scent of the animal cages wafted out the two doors, and from the sideshow tent, a few yards away, the voice of a negro woman shouting some song mingled with the buzz of the midway.

"For some reason or other," Musselman told them in a deep musical voice, "those two names, especially together, are familiar to me. Showmen?"

"Have been," Groody told him. "To make a long story short, I used to be in the Army Air Service, and Tom here in the United States Secret Service. I was, too, for a special job. We traveled with the Levin-Willet carnival for a while and rounded up that gang——"

"That's it!" barked Musselman, and suddenly his eyes were glowing and his whole being seemed to quicken.

He looked at them with new interest. Groody's bold face showed signs of the indefinable restlessness which had driven him since his early youth in search of something he could never find, but which always beckoned just around the corner. It was a strong face, marked with lines of experience of every kind, and imprinted with the hard recklessness which was a result of his own nature and years of experience, sordid and otherwise. Hat slightly on the

side of his head and over one eye, dented casually; tie a bit loosely and carelessly knotted; one hand in his coat pocket—he was the physical semblance of the man within.

Tom Service, on the other hand, was the glass of fashion and the mould of form, from his wing collar and bow tie to his broad toed and highly polished black oxfords. In a city he could have gotten away with a monocle and cane without being mobbed.

"Still in the Secret Service?" Musselman asked, that glow still on his now vastly more attractive face.

Tom shook his head.

"Not right now," he said gently. "I've been in and out, you know. Special duty."

"We've got a combined proposition to put up to you, Mr. Musselman," Groody told him. "Or to whomever would handle it, which I suppose is you. In the first place——"

He had to stop as a burst of applause came from the tent within. Then he went on:

"Let's get things right, first. You are the personal representative of Mr. James, majority stockholder of the corporation that owns the Gavin-Garfield show, here. Am I right?"

Musselman nodded.

"You," Groody pursued, holding his cigar in his hand, "were sent on here to see if you couldn't fix up the show. If I'm wrong, stop me. That's the reason we figured you were the man to see.

"Now then, if you don't want to answer these questions you needn't, of course. But, in the first place, the Gavin-Garfield is the second biggest show in the world, and it's been doing losing business for months. Right?"

Musselman was serious, now, and his bulging brown eyes were bright and keen and never left the lanky flyer's aquiline face.

"You are," he returned tersely.

"It may be partly due to bad weather and local conditions," Groody went on, his steel-gray eyes meeting the showman's squarely from beneath habitually lowered lids. "But the show's also run into a bunch of hard luck within itself, so to speak, that's helped crab business. You've had more than your share of happenings that hurt your trade. Animals getting

lose and scaring the audience, stampedes, losing some of your animals, fights among your men, and all that. As I understand it, the show's got so many damage suits against it now that it'll take a fortune to clean 'em up. Furthermore, you're having trouble getting licenses to show in some towns, because of the reputation that's been spread ahead of you for accidents—and for running 'strong'. Some folks seem to think that you're carrying a mob of grifters along, and you've been refused some good towns. Right?"

MUSSELMAN'S eyes probed the tall airman's steadily, a curious light in them. Tom Service listened stoically. That was always his rôle. He took everything in, sorted it in his mind, and when the conversation was over he usually had something to say with meat on its bones.

"How do you know so much?" Musselman inquired, and bit off the end of a plethoric black cigar.

Groody never showed his hand if he could help it. That he'd read vague rumors in the *Billboard*, which is the magazine of the outdoor show business; that Chicago happens to be the center of the tent show world; and that he'd entered into casual conversation there with an old showman whose name, even, he did not know, would not sound very impressive.

"Suppose we let that go," he suggested, and that sweeping line around the left corner of his mouth deepened. "It's our business to keep in touch with a lot of things."

Musselman took a long draught on his cigar.

"Well?" he inquired.

The dark, well groomed showman, looking like the city business man he was, was plainly at a loss. He was deeply interested, and yet thoroughly at sea.

"In the first place, did it ever occur to you that there might be a connection between all these happenings?" inquired Groody. "Something worthy of investigation? Some competitor, perhaps, trying to ruin your business?"

"Of course."

"Done anything about it?"

Musselman's face was almost forbidding, now, as he seemed to be concentrating savagely on Groody.

"Are you on your own?" he asked abruptly. "Not with the Government any more?"

"No!" Groody told him. "Freelances."

"I see no reason why I should go into details about my business to two strangers," Musselman's bass voice announced in forthright terms.

He raised his hand in a gesture which Groody was to find out was habitual. Strong, thick fingers, terminated by perfectly manicured nails, smoothed the sleek black hair absently.

"There isn't," Groody assured him. "But we've got a combined proposition whereby we can help your business, and also help you out, maybe, in your problem. Of course, it'll cost you plenty of money."

It seemed as though that last sentence brought a spark into the big dark eyes.

"Yes? What?"

"I want to ask a couple more questions——"

"Wait a minute!" barked Musselman, cigar in hand. "First off, can you two prove your identities?"

"Absolutely."

Having brought divers papers north with them to help out on the loan, both oil men selected a few, and handed them over to Musselman.

He ran through them like lightning, that frown deeper and the strong, dark face impassive. In fact, its expression never seemed to change. The expressive eyes were the only indicators of emotional shifting within.

"O. K.," he said briefly. "Mr. Groody, as I recall it, while Mr. Service was in charge of the investigation of the criminal ring operating around the Levin-Willet carnival, you actually carried out the thing. You were planted with the show as a flyer, carrying passengers and arranging publicity ahead."

Groody nodded.

"I didn't imagine you'd recall it," he stated.

"That's my business," Musselman said curtly.

Without hesitation he fired six questions regarding the Levin-Willet show at Groody. The airman answered accurately.

"All right, Mr. Groody," Musselman told him. "Now what's this proposition that's going to cost me so much money?"

"Before I spring it, will you answer

some questions? You say you and your boss have figured some dirty work afoot around the show somewhere. Done anything about it?"

"Several detectives planted," Musselman said briefly. "Some quit of their own accord. Others no damn good. Three here now, acting as working men in different departments."

"Good ones?"

"Supposedly."

Tom Service peered solemnly through his round glasses, one hand at his lightly tanned round face.

"Where from? What agency?" he inquired.

"Kearn-Davis."

Tom nodded, and relapsed into silence.

"Haven't done anything, eh?" inquired Groody.

"Seems to be nothing to do. Things happen, but the men are reliable. Just dumbness—accidents. However, some things can't be explained that easily. But not a thing's been found out."

"Does Mr. Service's past career, plus my little soirée with that carnival outfit, impress you as indicating that perhaps we're better qualified to find out whether anything definite's boiling in your show?" asked Groody.

"Is that what you're after? Jobs as detectives?"

"Not entirely. As a possible sideline, though. A combination of talents," Groody told him airily. "We'll keep this confidential. How much does it cost the corporation to run this shindig per day?"

"As hooked up now, between five and six thousand dollars," Musselman shot back.

"What's your capacity? What business can you do a day if comfortably full?"

"Fifteen thousand."

Groody inserted his attenuated cigar in the corner of his thin mouth, and took a reflective drag.

"Going from Illinois here into pretty good territory?"

"Michigan, Ohio, West Virginia, and on east to Boston. Pretty fair, although the mining country around through southern Ohio hasn't been so prosperous. Michigan figures well, and New York and Massachusetts, if the weather's right."

"Got a good show—worthy of patronage?"

"One of the best in the country, if not

the best!" Musselman declared. "The Big Show cut out the animals this year. We've got 'em, the best ever presented. The Wardell troupe—a lot of other star acts. A real show."

"That's on the level?" Service asked gently.

"See for yourself this evening, or read the writeups!" snapped Musselman. "What's on your mind? I'd import a group of pterodactyls to help business!"

Groody's gray eyes lifted a trifle as the word "pterodactyl" flowed from Musselman's lips without effort. It substantiated what he'd decided almost instantly after meeting the showman. That was that Musselman was an educated business man and not a practical showman. Sent on from headquarters as financial manager and efficiency man, doubtless.

"We've got a combined scheme which you ought to be interested in," Groody stated flatly, and outlined it.

Musselman listened without a word, but suddenly it seemed that two curtains over his eyes had been raised, and revealed all the fire within them. The expression on his forcefully comely face did not change, save as the animation in his eyes gave light and life to it.

When Groody had finished he asked abruptly:

"On the first basis, you supplying everything and on straight salary, what would you ask?"

"Two thousand dollars a day," Groody stated, and he didn't bat an eye.

Tom Service took off his glasses, polished them vigorously, and permitted himself a slight smile. Within the big top the band was playing like mad, and shouts and screams could be heard as some sensational act worked up the audience. "That includes everything except grub. For the first week. If business doesn't pick up more than that, we'll work thereafter for five thousand a week, plus a percentage."

And right there Groody got the surprise of his life. Musselman did not faint; he didn't even say a word about salary.

"All financial matters with this show are in my hands," he said swiftly. "I'm going to have you put the matter up to the staff. But mention nothing about salary. Understand?"

Groody nodded. But he didn't understand, exactly.

CHAPTER III

UNDER CANVAS

THREE minutes later Groody and Service were behind the sideshow tent, and behind them came Musselman, followed by three men, to whom was presently added the little old man whom they'd heard making the sideshow opening.

"Gentlemen, I want you to meet Lieutenant George Groody and Mr. Service," Musselman said. "This is Mr. MacDonald—Pop MacDonald, the manager of the sideshow and a showman for forty years."

The wispy little old man, foppishly attired in a spotless Palm Beach suit and a Panama hat, shook hands with the smile of a roguish elf below his white mustache. His face was a mass of wrinkles, mostly laugh wrinkles; and a pair of very bright black eyes twinkled at the two strangers.

"And this is Jack Farrell, manager and part owner of the show."

Groody shook hands with a stocky man of medium height, wearing a flat leghorn hat turned down all around. It shaded a rather full face which smiled genially, but a pair of very keen, very cold gray eyes, which were as piercing a pair of optics as the flyer had ever seen, did not change expression.

"This is Mr. Bullion, assistant manager," Musselman went on.

Bullion's grip fairly crushed the flyer's sinewy hand. He was a strapping, broad shouldered fellow, younger than either Musselman or Farrell, with a long straight nose, a square jaw, and a pair of narrow, oriental looking eyes. An impressive man of thirty-five, possibly, with his soft hat carelessly perched on the back of his head and competence in every move of his big body.

"And this is Mr. O'Donnelly, boss canvasman," Musselman concluded.

The Gargantuan Irishman's rugged face split in a wide grin, and his dark eyes glowed warmly. Thick, curly black hair showed beneath his battered soft hat, and his shaven chin was dark.

"Glad t' know yuh, Lieutenant!" he said in a curiously charming mixture of Irish brogue and Boston accent. "You, too, Misther Service."

"State your proposition, Groody," Musselman commanded. "No, wait a minute.

"Mr. Groody is the army flying ace who

got thirteen planes in the war, and who joined that old Levin-Willet show a year ago as a Secret Service man and got that gang of thugs in jail. You remember, all of you, I suppose?"

All four men merely nodded. Groody immediately caught an undercurrent of hostility between the trio and their temporary boss. The natural dislike, doubtless, for any outsider who came in with authority. Farrell, particularly, was as cold as a piece of ice, and his remarkable gray eyes never left the faces of the two strangers.

"Mr. Service was a Government Secret Service man for a long time. They have a proposition to put up to the show."

As Groody faced them, lounging easily against a guy rope of the sideshow tent, he was aware of a subtle change in all three men. The big boss canvasman was smiling, and there was a twinkle in his eyes as they surveyed the flyer. Farrell was cold and reserved, but if anything his eyes seemed sharper and brighter. Bullion was looking him up and down as though inspecting, with some admiration and curiosity, a freak. Tom Service, taciturn and vacuous, was slightly in the rear. He created no particular attention, and would strive not to. But he'd be absorbing every detail of the life about him, and be filing away every word that was said.

The sideshow tent was comparatively quiet, and three of the negro minstrels came wandering out as Groody started to talk.

"The proposition's simply this," he told them. "We want to come with this show to increase your business and to find out what, if anything except bad luck, is responsible for your misfortunes. Service is one of the best investigators extant, and he will be manager of the flying act as far as the show is concerned. I'll be the wing-walker of the flying circus we propose to run for you.

"I'll get two more flyers, and two ships. And we'll put on a wingwalking show, transferring from ship to ship, and all that stuff, every day before the matinée and every evening before the second show when it's light enough. Furthermore, in the morning of each day, a ship'll fly over the next town on your route, advertising your coming, dropping dodgers, and putting on a little wingwalking to stir 'em up.

"The regular show'll be done so low that people'll have to come to the lot to see it. If you can get them out, you can get 'em into your show. It's worth a ream of publicity before you hit a town, and a lot of admissions afterward.

"And all the time, we'll be working around to get the dope, if there is any. We supply everything except a place to sleep and eat."

When he finished there was absolute silence for a moment. From the big top the never ceasing band music was still audible, and in the sideshow tent some Hawaiian music and singing evinced that the performance was still going on.

"Good idea!" came O'Donnelly's hearty voice. "Of course, I ain't got nothin' t' say about it, but if the price is right it might do some good. I been sayin' almost since we been out that there's a jinx on this show——"

"What about you, Farrell?" interrupted Musselman, and the Irishman shot a suddenly sullen look at his interrupter.

"What's the price?" inquired the icy manager. "And you know them, I presume?"

"Yes," Musselman said, somewhat to Groody's surprise. "I'll fix the price up."

"Might be all right to try," Farrell said evenly.

His voice had a curious timbre in it, and was surprisingly soft. As he shot a look at Musselman the hostility in it was as evident as though it had been spoken.

"Listen, Musselman," Farrell said suddenly, as the big boss was turning to Bullion. "You say you'll fix the price. I'm manager of this show, and I own part of it. And I'm going to have something to say about the price!"

It was said deliberately, without particular venom, and yet every word crackled and snapped. Musselman's forceful face grew darker.

"We'll see about that later! You had your shot at this show, Farrell. I represent the majority owner. And financial arrangements'll be run by me. You get the show on and off the lot and run the performance. I'll attend to the rest.

"Bullion, what do you think?"

"Them outdoor attractions is sometimes good," big Bullion said vigorously. "And God knows we need somethin' to jack up business. And if we can get a detective

around here that knows his way around after dark we might find out somethin'."

"We got three, haven't we?" snapped Farrell.

O'Donnelly—Bronk O'Donnelly—gave vent to a large Irish snort. Bullion threw up one brawny arm.

"That may be their title!" he declared. "So might mine be the Pope! Well, if yuh ask me, I'd say that this show needs a shot in the arm if ever one did. If the money's right, I'd say take 'em on trial."

"Why on trial?" snapped Musselman. "You know that Levin-Willet business, don't you? They're the best——"

"Sure. Just what'll you do, boys?"

It was Farrell, cutting in quietly. As Groody explained a tentative schedule for the flying circus the others listened closely.

"All right," Musselman interrupted. "I just wanted to let you all know. I'm going to hire 'em. Come on over to the front door, Groody. You too, Service."

Without a word the general manager made off, alongside Groody. Service pattered along slightly behind them. Suddenly Musselman stopped, and yelled over his shoulder:

"O'Donnelly! Come over in fifteen minutes to the front door. I want to see you!"

Groody looked around at the four showmen standing there. The genial Irishman's face was now lowering, and his lower lip was thrust out like that of a pouting child. Bullion looked as though he was cursing. Farrell, something about him as cool and smooth and hard as polished granite, stood and chewed on a straw, an unreadable look in his eyes. Pop MacDonald, somehow, seemed wistfully distressed.

"Somehow or other, they don't look happy," Groody got a chance to murmur to Service.

Tom's round, childlike face grew more moonlike as he grinned.

"This is looking better," he said quietly, and Groody wondered just what he meant.

CHAPTER IV

TROUBLE

MUSSELMAN led them into the marquee entrance, saying over his shoulder:

"We'll go into the menagerie here."

They followed him behind the canvas

screen which shut off the tent from outside onlookers, and in an instant the smell of the circus was strong on the breeze.

Musselman, in the lead, was walking rapidly down through the tent, but Groody and Service took their time as they looked about. To their right the "connection"—canvas passageway from menagerie to big top—gave a glimpse of sparsely covered benches within the big top. Occupying the entire right side of the tent was a row of animal cages, placed end to end and with connecting doors. The sidewalls of the big top almost touched those of the menagerie on that side, so that the polar bears, tigers, lions and leopards could be driven down a short runway into the main tent.

On the left side eighteen elephants, ranging from Tess, the big leader of the herd, down to small baby beasts, were standing in line. The elephant men, all in uniform, were standing guard, waiting for the moment when the herd was due in the arena. Two camels were at the lower end of the tent, alongside the hippopotamus cage.

The passageway which ran in front of the animal cages was a roadway for clowns and other performers who made their entrances and exits from the connection. In all manner of costumes, from tights to exaggerated clown makeup, continuous streams of "kinkers" were flowing in each direction. At the extreme lower end of the tent an opening showed a glimpse of an uncovered yard which seemed to be full of animals and people.

"Quite a seductive scene, Tom," opined Groody, stalking deliberately along, cigar in hand.

"Look at those horses!" Tom answered, and as he spoke a long parade of horses, in pairs, a groom between each pair, came trotting up the passageway in front of the animal cages. Perfectly matched, twelve bay and twelve black, they speedily were lined up in the connection way, ready to go on.

"Musselman's gone over by that hippopotamus," Groody remarked. "He seems to be waiting for us. Tom, tell me: You don't suppose he's going to fall for two thousand a day, do you?"

Tom chuckled.

"Search me," he opined. "I can't bother thinking. I smell too much."

Musselman was awaiting them, but they took their time as they looked over the superb, black maned lions in the center cages and the sleek females at the lower end of the row of wagons. The hippo came in for a bit of attention, and Groody cast a look or two at the painted and gaudily costumed performers, both men and women, who trudged up and down the tent on their way to or from the big top.

"Come over here—then I won't be disturbed," Musselman told them, and lifted up the sidewall of the tent just behind the hippo cage, which, incidentally, smelled to high heaven.

Groody found himself in an angle formed by the menagerie tent and a canvas wall which surrounded what he was later to know as the "back yard". The back yard was the open space between dressing tents and big top, surrounded by an eight foot wall of canvas.

"Gentlemen, you're hired," Musselman told them abruptly. "With some details to be adjusted. In the first place, you say you have one flyer available, and have to look up one more. I have him for you, and want you to use him."

"Who?" asked Groody.

"A nephew of mine. He was in the Air Service during the war, and is crazy for an opportunity to travel with this show. Furthermore, he was in a flying circus outfit out on the coast last year. Good man. Name's Young—Charley Young."

"Didn't know him," Groody told him. "Listen, Mr. Musselman. Get this straight. If Young proves all right, O. K. with me. But we make no arrangement whatever which makes it obligatory to use any certain flyer before I try him out!"

"Young's all right, and you'll use him!"

The square jawed showman's tone Groody had heard before, but it didn't get a foot with him.

"The hell you say!" the flyer said briefly. "I'll give him a chance, but I run my own show because it's my neck that's at stake. Take it or leave it!"

His eyes were bleak and cold, then, and his mouth was drooping on one side a bit more than usual. Tom, round eyed and silent, just listened and pretended to watch the kaleidoscopic scene in the back yard.

For a second Musselman's eyes had red tints in them, and his face was suffused with blood. Then:

"I see your point. It's useless to argue. Young's an expert, so that will adjust itself. Now listen."

His eyes wandered from one to the other of them for a second, and he lifted his right hand to stroke his black hair.

"I'm not haggling about your price. It's too high, of course, but the man I represent would spend a hundred thousand to put this outfit on its feet. It's a wreck. Not a man in the organization trusts anyone else. I didn't tell you the whole truth when we first talked."

"Somebody—God knows who, or how many there are—but somebody's trying to ruin this show! And not a soul in the world has any idea how far they've gone. There are canvasmen, gentlemen, underneath the sod that the public doesn't know about!"

Groody's lanky body stiffened slightly. Tom's eyes were rounder than ever.

"Foul play, of course?" he asked.

"Yes. Found outside the lot, all of them. Four. Murdered in one way or another. Of course, the laborers are a rough gang; there may have been fights. But it's giving the show a rotten name. We're watched everywhere."

"Everything possible has happened. Some of these things simply couldn't be accidents. No need of me telling the whole story now. It might confuse you, and no man can know just what was due to accident, and what not. No one can be sure that any single thing wasn't accidental, either. Equipment going bad, animals tampered with, fights everywhere; the show's a mad-house. Performers are uneasy and frightened. The labor turnover, always tremendous with a show, has reached proportions where up to fifty men quit in each town. We're always short handed. And, gentlemen, the Gavin-Garfield show is being destroyed!"

GROODY lit a new cigar with deliberation as he watched twelve white horses gallop through the back yard and into a long tent at the lower end of it, opposite menagerie and big top entrances.

"You said that somebody was trying to ruin the show," he reminded Musselman. "Know that? Or just surmise it?"

"No, I don't know it," Musselman said frankly. "I said that because it doesn't seem possible that all that has happened

could happen unless there was a plan behind it. As you move around the show you'll hear the whole story. And yet, deep down, probably, I don't really believe there is anything to it but rotten luck."

"Who'd be behind a scheme like that?" Service interrupted, his owlish eyes on Musselman's rugged face. "Some competitor?"

Musselman hesitated. The roar of a lion came from the menagerie tent, and out in the back yard a dozen or so men and women, in white tights covered by bathrobes, were emerging from the dressing rooms at each end of the long tent at the lower end of the yard. The ring stock, Groody observed, occupied the central portion of this tent, and the men and women performers had compartments at each end.

"No," the G. M. said slowly. "Possible, of course, but not probable. Nothing seems probable, for that matter."

He hesitated again. Clearly he wanted to say something which he could not bring himself to utter without a struggle. Groody and Service waited quietly. In Groody's mind there were several different lines of thought. It appeared that they had taken a running dive into something which promised considerable excitement.

"Listen, gentlemen," Musselman exploded suddenly, and his bulging black eyes roved from face to face. "You may have observed that the members of this show do not like me. That's natural and understandable. I'm not a practical showman. I'm a business man, sent here against my will to see what I can do. I'm not one of the fraternity, although I've been in the game from the headquarters end for some years."

"Due to the nervous strain of this season to date, as I said, the whole show's a mad-house. No one trusts anyone else. They walk around like dogs with their tails between their legs. But there's one thing they all agree on. All the bosses, I mean. That is that they hate me, and wish I was to hell out of the show!"

"The business is sort of a closed corporation, eh?" suggested Service.

"Exactly. If I give an order—though I try to keep out of the actual running of the show and just attend to financial details—it's obeyed grudgingly. But by God I'm here to do a job, and I'll do it!"

That jaw was outthrust, and the promi-

nent eyes flashed as though tiny thunderstorms, split by lightning, were in their depths.

"What I've told you," Musselman went on in calmer fashion, "may reduce the importance of what I'm going to say now. I hate to say it. I've got no right to say it. My detectives haven't found out a thing. But mark me—and I hope you prove me wrong—but—"

"Watch Jack Farrell!"

Groody's narrow eyes bored into the showman's.

"Doesn't he own twenty-five per cent of this show?" he barked.

"He does."

"Well, then, why——"

"I don't know!" Musselman said frankly. "I figured maybe he wanted to buy the whole outfit for little or nothing, and was organizing all this stuff to make the outfit a white elephant on my boss's hands. Sounds far fetched, I know. But Farrell started in this business as a carnival concession man a good many years ago, when the business was tough and there were more grifters and strong joints around any show than there were legitimate attractions. Get me?"

Groody nodded. That cool, contained, shrewd eyed manager, with the hint of a Southern accent in his voice. . . .

"If he was behind some of this hard luck," Service suggested gently, "he'd have to have help. Who?"

"Bullion sticks to him," Musselman stated. "Most of the rest of the staff have been with him for years."

"Are you insinuating that the bosses of this show, or any considerable number of 'em, are capable of murder and all that stuff?" demanded Groody frankly.

Musselman shook his head wearily.

"No," he confessed. "As to Farrell, I wouldn't be surprised. In fact, I don't know where I am, to tell the truth. You'll just have to find things out for yourself. Don't let what I say count too much. I won't even tell you the minor happenings which seem to point to Farrell. Might prejudice you."

"One more thing before I turn you over to Bronk O'Donnelly while I get hold of Mr. Mettal, our adjuster, and get your contract fixed up. Two thousand dollars a day is a ridiculous price for your circus, of course, although you do risk your neck.

But I'm willing to go to any lengths to raise the damnable shadow that hangs over this show and is making seven hundred lunatics out of the outfit instead of a family. I consider that I'm getting the most capable men in the country for that job. I know more about you than you think—and I'll tell the few people whom I want to allow in my confidence the same thing.

"Second, your work will be at least doubly dangerous if you perform it—the flying end, I mean—around this show. You're coming to a haunted outfit, where anything's liable to happen.

"Third, any desperate measure to stimulate business will justify itself if it does the work. Between bad weather, the show's rotten reputation, huge labor turnover, equipment mysteriously going bad, animals dying, and damage suits, this show's losing more than two thousand dollars a day! So what's two thousand extra, if it does any good?"

Groody had forgotten entirely about the money they were to get, which indicates clearly how much of a business man he was at heart. When excitement loomed ahead, minor matters like money were pushed entirely into the background.

He drew in on his cigar, and nodded.

"I see your point," he stated. "And you see ours. It isn't so damn high at that. We've got our investment in ships, which we're liable to lose at any second. The services of three flying men, for just ordinary flying, are worth two hundred a week apiece."

"Is that what Young'll get?"

"If he qualifies, yes."

"And the standard price for a wing-walker and aerial daredevil is about a thousand a day at any fair. Furthermore, the services of Tom here alone, in his line, couldn't be had for less than three hundred per," Groody went on spacioisly, and if that line around his mouth temporarily cut deeper it was on the side opposite Musselman, anyway.

"So," he concluded, "in view of conditions, the price doesn't seem too high."

"Another thing," Musselman told them. "Before I take you and leave you with Bronk we might as well fix details up. When will you return with the ships, Groody?"

"Less than a week. Can get a midnight train out of Chicago for Indianapolis to—

night. That's where I'll get the planes. Government Air Depot there is selling 'em"

"Good. Make it as quick as you can. Mr. Service, you'll stay with the show, of course?"

Tom nodded.

"I don't know just what to give you to do. Make you a ticket seller, I guess. Candy butcher'd be better, but you've been around here all dressed up and been seen by too many people. Ticket seller'll be O. K., anyway. You can get in with the mob, and you'll have plenty of work to do besides sell tickets. You'll also be manager of the flying circus, to give you a higher position in the show."

The circus man stopped, and chewed the stub of his cigar thoughtfully.

"Don't let *anybody* know what you're getting," he instructed them. "Don't let anybody, aside from the executives who know it now, get wise that you're trying to ferret things out. And, in view of the situation, we might as well make this arrangement. I'm unpopular around here, as I told you. It might handicap you to be known as my employees, and particularly as my intimates. So you horn in with the gang, knock me all you like, and try to be one of them. It'll be pleasanter for you, enable you to work more effectively, and I'll get along without knowing you're alive any oftener than I have to. Understand?"

Groody nodded.

"Sounds best," he agreed.

SUDDEN silence within the tent as two groups of people came out of the big top with two white horses. All were dressed in red tights, evidently riding acts just off. Then came the vague, booming voice of an announcer bellowing something to the crowd. The robed acrobats were lined up, ready to go in. Evidently they were more or less of a star act, for the announcement was a long one.

"The Flying Wardells," Musselman told them. "Best casting act in show business. And Ed Wardell's about ready to pull the troupe out of the show, on account of——"

"Mr. Musselman!"

A tall, tanned chap in cap and riding breeches, carrying a whip, was running across the littered yard.

"Sir Martin, Kate Bullion's horse, just

died in less'n ten seconds!" barked the newcomer.

Musselman's dark face seemed to freeze. Then those eyes became turbulent, and the heavy jaw was jutting forth like a rugged cliff.

"Been sick?"

"Nossir! Kate's in hysterics. Can't go on."

"Have Byers make an announcement," directed Musselman. "Tell Farrell, and just use what I said as a suggestion. It's Farrell's show to run."

The man ran off through the menagerie top. Out in the yard clowns, ballet girls dressed in riding habits, and animal men were talking excitedly. Whether it was imagination or not, Groody thought he could see shadows on all their faces. It seemed that they huddled together fearfully, in terror of what would happen next.

"Kate Bullion's the assistant manager's wife," Musselman said slowly, his deep voice husky. "Sir Martin was the apple of her eye, trained to rear, buck, dance, and all that in the riding finale. She's the world's champion woman rider. Featured act.

"By God, we're going to lose the whole show!"

In that explosion the man's iron self-control was suddenly gone. Such desperate, passionate revolt showed in his voice that Groody was startled.

"Must be poison, eh?" he asked.

"Sure! But how? With everybody watching everybody else? I tell you——"

He stopped abruptly.

"Come on. I'll hand you over to Bronk while I look up Mettal and get things fixed up."

They walked the few feet around to the menagerie entrance, past the cages, and met Farrell and Bullion striding swiftly toward the yard, accompanied by the trainer who had broken the news. Farrell's face was composed, and yet there was something cold and deadly in its contours and flashing from his eyes. Bullion's mouth was a mere cut across his strong face, and those oriental eyes were opaque slits in his head.

Neither one said a word to Musselman as they passed him, nor did they pay any attention to Groody and Service.

"I guess you can't start until you get working," Groody told Tom. "Fine outfit, eh?"

"Looks that way," Tom replied absently.

"We can be sending five thousand or so a week down there while it lasts," Groody said with satisfaction. "What do you make of all this, Watson?"

Tom shook his head.

"Search me. It'll narrow down to a few possibilities in time. Never can tell."

"Musselman's got a tough break, hasn't he? What do you know about him paying us two thousand *a day*?"

"I'm wondering about that," Tom said slowly, and suddenly a glimmer of an idea was born in Groody's brain.

He stalked along with slightly bent knees, carrying a new and unlighted cigar. He never glanced at the dozen polar bears sweltering in their cages, or at the line of elephants munching their hay.

"It looks to me, Thomas," he said as they reached the screen in front of the door, "as though the only friend we'll have in this show is Musselman. The bosses don't go crazy about him, do they? And he's hired us, which'll make the rest of 'em sore. And I'm wondering if whoever's doing this poisoning and——"

"If anybody," suggested Tom.

"You don't seriously doubt it, do you? Think it's a series of accidents?"

"No. I don't think anything, yet," Tom replied gently. "It's very bad to have preconceived ideas, George."

CHAPTER V

REVOLT

AT THE entrance they were just in time to hear Musselman yell:

"Bronk!"

The burly boss canvasman was walking up the midway, headed away from the meeting place. He stopped, turned, and came walking back slowly, as though with great reluctance.

"I been waitin' here ten minutes, and I've got somethin' else t' do besides hang around lettin' my feet sprout!" he said flatly, that lower lip sticking out again and his tanned face scowling.

"Oh, you have, have you?" snapped the overwrought Musselman. "Well, orders are orders around this show, O'Donnelly!"

The boss canvasman grunted.

"Yeh?" he said with studied contempt.

"What are they now? Givin' the canvasmen a ration o' perfume or somethin', or get feather beds for the detectives around this broken down troupe?"

"That'll be all out of you!" Musselman flared. "By God, you hold your tongue around here——"

"The hell I will!" bellowed O'Donnelly, and now he was out in the open. "I'm quittin' right now, see? I'm not stayin' another minute."

"What's the matter, Bronk?" came an even voice, and Farrell strolled coolly around the wall of the marquee.

"I'm quittin', that's what!" blared the big Irishman. "I ain't——"

"Let me handle this, Musselman," Farrell said quietly.

"Let you handle nothing! I gave an order to O'Donnelly, and I'm sick and tired of his temperament around here anyhow. When I say meet me somewhere, that's what I mean! And if he don't like it, by God he can get out of this show! In fact, I'll fire him now!"

"Good!" roared O'Donnelly, and now his face was aflame and his full lips drawn back in a snarl. "And before I go, I'm going to leave you a souvenir——"

In full sight of the hundred or so people lingering on the midway, the big fellow leaped forward at Musselman. A huge fist started its swing for the smaller man's jaw.

Just why he did it Groody never quite understood. The infuriated boss was more than a match for Musselman, of course, and a fight would do the show no good, under the circumstances.

As O'Donnelly leaped in, Groody's rangy body shot forward from beside Musselman. He dived under that crashing swing, and as he hit O'Donnelly just above the knees the big fellow went toppling like a tackled football player.

The midway crowd surged forward to watch as O'Donnelly bounded to his feet and whirled toward Groody. George saw what was coming, and wasted no time. Cursing the sudden complication, nevertheless he did the only thing he could do. Before O'Donnelly's blow was well started Groody's fist crashed to the Irishman's jaw, and as the canvasman staggered Groody leaped back.

"Get him!" he barked—and Farrell, cool as ever, had him.

"Never mind, Bronk!" he was saying. "No hard feelings. Come on, now."

"The hell there ain't!" bellowed O'Donnelly, and he was so mad he could scarcely talk. "So that's your game, Mister Flyer, is it? Well, I'm gonna——"

"Get out of here, Musselman," Farrell said incisively. He had O'Donnelly helpless from behind. "Come back in the tent, everybody."

"What do you mean, me get out of here?" snapped Musselman, and his eyes were shot with red. "Come back in the tent, yes. We'll see who's boss around here, right now!"

Bronk came to himself as he saw the crowd which was packed five deep in front of him. He picked up his hat, and with hatred implanted on his scowling face strode into the menagerie top.

They followed him, Groody and Service walking together.

"That little old fellow at the desk doesn't look as though he was enjoying it much," whispered Tom as they passed the show auditor in the marquee.

His face was really tragic as they passed him.

"Looks to me as though this show was breaking up as much from within as without," stated Groody. "I wonder what's ahead with that Irish bull?"

The tall flyer's bold face reflected nothing but a sort of fierce enjoyment.

THE menagerie tent was practically deserted. The elephants were back in their places, and from the music and applause Groody judged the Wardell troupe was on. The performers in the grand riding finale were gathered in the back yard, and evidently none of them used the entrance through the menagerie.

O'Donnelly, six feet two of flaming fury, was awaiting them. Groody could hear Musselman and Farrell talking in low tones, but not so low that any illusion of harmony prevailed.

It was Musselman who beat O'Donnelly to the first word.

"O'Donnelly, you're fired. That's all there is to it."

"Bronk, don't listen to him!" snapped Farrell. "He's not fired, Musselman!"

"Damn it all, I'm quittin'!" roared O'Donnelly. "And before I screw——"

"Shut up! . . . Musselman!"

The manager's voice cut through O'Don-

nelly's booming tones and the crash of the band as plainly as though all had been silence before he spoke.

"By God, if you try to fire the best boss canvasman in the country I'll beat you to a pulp first and then I'll hop to Indiana and I'll see to it——"

"You'll do not a damn thing!" rasped Musselman. "I'm running this show."

"The hell you are," Farrell told him with deadly gentleness. "I own twenty-five per cent of this outfit, and by all that's holy I'm sick and tired of your interfering. I'll run my own show, by God, and from this day on, corporation or no corporation."

"I represent seventy-five per cent!" Musselman told him, his dark face thrust up into the masklike countenance of the manager. "Don't forget that, or I'll fire you!"

O'Donnelly, barrel-like chest heaving and lower lip thrust forward an inch, was like a volcano held momentarily in check, but about to go into eruption at any moment. In every word and glance of the three there was obvious the effect of the terrific strain they had all been under. For the moment they were berserk.

"Oh, you will, will you?" Farrell asked quietly, and murder was looking out of his cold gray eyes as he said it.

He took a step forward, narrowed eyes never leaving the face of the outsider they all hated. Vest swinging loose, hat brim turned down all around; a very ordinary figure until one looked at his face. Therein Groody could see the temper of the man's steel, forged by twenty years of hand to hand battling from one end of the country to the other.

"Musselman, I'm telling you something," Farrell went on, his voice vibrant. "You came here and I've let you have your rope. You're wrecking this show. You've alienated every man on the staff. Now you're trying to fire O'Donnelly, the one man in the business that can hold these hundreds of scared canvasmen with the Gavin-Garfield show!"

"You're going to fire nobody. If necessary, I'll tie you up and gag you until I can get to Chi and down to Indiana and buy out the rest of the show! I can get the money, and don't think I can't, and then I'll kick you to hell back to your damn office and your dictaphone, where you belong."

Musselman did not answer. His crimson-flecked eyes stared into the cold gray ones of the manager, and he never moved.

Then O'Donnelly took a step forward, and one great fist gripped Musselman's arm. He whirled his chief around without taking care to be gentle, and the next second his rugged face was within an inch of the G. M.'s.

"So y'u're firin' me, eh?" he snarled, and his brogue was thick as cream. "You, ye gutter scum, ye imitation showman, firin' Bronk O'Donnelly, huh? 'Tis an insult. But I'm quittin', and I'll lick ye now or-r later, makes no difference, until ye learn that ye got no business with a show!

"Jack, if ye buy the outfit, I'll join again. But now I'm through."

"Listen, men!"

"I'll listen t' nothin'! Ye're spoilin' the show just by contaminatin' the air!" raved O'Donnelly, his fist clenching and unclenching as though he could barely resist the temptation to hit him. The animal men, busy around the cages, were now grouped together, watching. "You, and yer trick detectives and you——

"Oh, what the hell. And thot reminds me!"

He whirled on Groody.

"So you're the kind that's spoilin' for a fight, eh?" he roared. "Interfere with me, would ye, for your fake boss here? Well, I'm gonna learn you, too."

"What?" barked Groody, and the word was like a pistol shot.

He didn't move. One knee slightly bent, towering over anyone there, there was something contemptuous in his self-control.

O'Donnelly was taken off his guard. He stopped and stuttered, trying to find words.

"Men, listen," begged Musselman, who seemed to have come down off his high horse.

He and Groody and Service had exchanged glances when Farrell had offered to buy the show, and since that moment Musselman had seemed to forget the fury which had had him in its grip. O'Donnelly blared forth again:

"Show you that a show ain't a place for——"

"Who?" shot Groody, and deliberately took out a fresh cigar.

Again was the big boss canvasman taken unawares. There was something uncanny in Groody's coolness.

"Now let me talk!" Groody said suddenly.

It was a method he had used before at times when the success or failure of important matters hung in the balance. Getting the jump on the other man. And he cast modesty to the winds when necessary.

"This is all useless," Farrell cut in coolly. "Musselman here just doesn't amount to a damn as far as this show is concerned from this moment on, law, or no law."

"Let me talk, I said!" barked Groody.

"Now listen, the whole bunch of you," he snapped. "I don't give a hoot in hell what you do with the show, or who's fired, or anything about it. The more I see of the cockeyed outfit the less I want to be around it, for that matter.

"But there's one thing, Mr. Bronk O'Donnelly, and Mr. Jack Farrell, and Mr. Musselman, for the whole three of you to remember when you talk to Service or me. We're not here to take a damn bit of lip from you, O'Donnelly, or any other man. We come here as men with reputations in our line, to help out this show at a good salary. And I'll do just as I damn well please, personally, as long as I don't break any rules. I'll interfere in any fights that I care to, and I'll back up my interference.

"Any time you don't believe it, try. Tom Service and I've fought our way out of tight places before and don't forget that, and we've licked tougher guys in the fore-castle of a South Seas tramp than the whole three of you put together are!

"And if by any chance our fists aren't good enough, there are other ways. So I don't want any more wisecracks about handpicked, dumb detectives, or anything of the sort! Is that plain?"

He'd talk incisively, biting off his words and neither raising nor lowering his voice. And he stood easily, cigar in hand, while his tongue played around them like a whiplash. A last ounce of savage sincerity as he finished his unhurried declaration seemed to hold the three men spell-bound.

THERE was silence for a moment. O'Donnelly's dark eyes seemed to have pinpoints of blinding light in them. He was slightly crouched, and he was looking at the flyer as though Groody

had been a new and startling species of freak.

"I apologize to every man here!"

It was Musselman, and his dark face was dully red. He raised his hand to stroke his hair as he groped for words. In contrast to his subordinates there was something dapper and sophisticated about him, largely due to his more correct speech, and conventional clothes.

"Gentlemen, the only way we can do anything is to stick together," he went on slowly. He leaned against the cage of the baby hippo as though very weary. Two tigers started to fight, and their snarls created no more attention than a kitten's purr.

"We're all frayed to the limit. Bronk, I apologize for treating you like a kid a few minutes ago, and bawling you out the way I did. But as a matter of fact you should have been there when I told you——"

"I'll run my own department with no side orders!" O'Donnelly said truculently, but it was plain that his vanity had been salvaged.

"The hell you will," Musselman told him, but this time he smiled a wintry, mirthless smile, as though trying to take the sting from his words. "Bronk, you don't run this show, and you've got to take orders. Let's try to get along.

"Jack, there's no reason for us to fight. I'm not here because I want to be, and I realize your position. We're all worried to death. We can get along, me tending to money and general affairs, and you running the show itself."

"Then don't come around here trying to fire my boss canvasman because he won't be an errand boy!" snapped Farrell, and there was no sign of softening in his steely eyes.

For a moment Musselman's eyes were turbulent, like inky whirlpools with red lights dancing in their turgid depths. Then, with an obvious effort, he controlled himself.

"Of course, I demand respect from every man on this show, and any order I see fit to give will be obeyed or that man will be fired!" he said swiftly. "But I'll try to keep hands off as much as possible. That's my last word on the subject, and anybody who objects can take any course they see fit!"

O'Donnelly glowered at him, and Jack Farrell was as adamant as ever.

"His soft soap, though, did a little bit of good, at that," Groody reflected. "Ten to one that Farrell's got the coldest nerve this far north."

Groody had seen that sort of man before, in divers places.

"Now men, I'm working night and day to put this show on its feet," Musselman went on, an almost pleading note in its deep tones. "You fellows object to the detectives——"

"Simple squirts!" snorted O'Donnelly. "Prowlin' around, makin' trouble for me, and never doin' a damn thing or findin' out anything! There's been more things happen since those false alarms got in the troupe than ever before."

"Don't forget that it's not so simple," Musselman told him, "And that we haven't put our hands on a thing yet—and you're supposed to be showmen! Personally, I'm divided. Sometimes, as I told Groody and Service this very afternoon, I'm convinced that somebody right in this show is trying his damndest to ruin it! Then, when I think of all that's happened—parade accidents, animals loose, men murdered, the robberies that take place in almost every town—I just have to throw up my hands and say that no gang on earth could be behind it all!"

"But that's neither here nor there. The fact that I've brought Groody and Service here—not brought 'em, but hired 'em—shows how desperate I am to get things straight. I'm paying a tremendous price for this flying circus and detective work combined."

"How much?" inquired Farrell, his eyes narrowed slightly.

"Not decided as yet, until we get a few expenses set. I'll tell you then."

"Inasmuch as one quarter of it's my money, I want to know now!"

The enmity between the two men showed in every look and word. Groody decided that it was partly instinctive, and not entirely due to the fact that Musselman was a layman, comparatively, who'd stepped in over Farrell's head.

"I'll tell you later," repeated Musselman, his brow like a thunder cloud. "I'm administering seventy-five per cent of the stock, and if I'm willing to pay three quarters of the amount you shouldn't kick.

Don't forget, Farrell, that you had your chance to clean up this outfit before I came on, and that if you'd done business and cut the rot out of your show I'd never be here!"

Farrell's thin lips lifted in the suspicion of a sneer. He did not answer, and it was as though he would not condescend to give the explanation which he could give.

"That's all," Musselman finished. "Bronk, I want you to show the fellows around a little, and get 'em introduced. Groody's leaving tonight, but Service will stay. Groody, see me right after supper at the white ticket wagon—right side of the midway going out. Just opposite the sideshow."

He walked away without another word, his dark head bent in thought and his right hand tugging at his hair.

"Come on," O'Donnelly told them. "Might as well see the rest of the show first."

"See you later," nodded Farrell, and there was no friendship in his eyes. Nor had there been in O'Donnelly's brusque words.

The two hundred and fifty pound canvasman led the way through the connection between menagerie and big top. Groody dropped back a bit, with Service.

"These boys get along well, don't they?" he inquired. "Notice Farrell jump in with that stuff about buying the show?"

Service nodded.

"And Musselman piped down," he said thoughtfully. "I guess he wants to get the goods on whoever's behind all this, if anybody."

"Begins to look as though Musselman might be pretty near right, and that this throne gang around here are up to no good."

"Of course, though," Tom reminded him, "Musselman hates Farrell, and they all hate the G. M. And don't forget that twisting facts to suit theories isn't so good. And maybe some crazy laborer, who thinks he's got a grudge, has been up to mischief all by himself, and that a few coincidences have made the whole thing look big."

"Think so?" demanded Groody.

Tom grinned.

"No," he admitted. "We aren't very popular, are we? Wish we weren't labeled Musselman men."

"We'll try to fix that," stated Groody.

CHAPTER VI

THE SHADOW OF MURDER

O'DONNELLY was waiting for them at the side of the connection.

"C'mon down to the lower end!" he told them, darting an unreadable look at Groody.

He was patently mulling things over in his mind, and probably could not place Groody exactly. But there was grudging respect in his attitude.

He led them down the track which ran between the tiers of seats and the three rings. The band was playing a waltz, very softly. High up in the vast big top, over each of the two end rings, a dozen or more lithe figures in white tights were swinging rhythmically through the air, or standing on their pedestals, above long, narrow nets spread to catch them if they fell.

The vast, three hundred and sixty foot big top was only half full, and the crowd had been seated in a semicircle at the lower end of the tent. The band was on a platform, half way down the left side. The runway for the animals from their cages to the center ring led past it.

O'Donnelly led them down the track, in front of the spectators. The ushers and ticket sellers were going through the crowd, and their racuous, though subdued, voices could be heard:

"Big musical comedy aftershow, only twenty-five cents. Beautiful girls, wonderful dancing—a Broadway production for only twenty-five cents. At the conclusion of the main performance!"

"Now this here," the big Irishman started suddenly, "is the Wardell troupe, star act of the show and the best casting act in show business, bar none. That's Eddie Wardell there—center catcher on the lower end. He's got troupes with the Sells-Floto and Haneman-Walters shows, too. Here, sit down here!"

They sat on the ground directly in front of the seats occupying the lower end of the tent, and Groody fastened his eyes on the acrobats above. O'Donnelly's enjoyment in giving technical information was apparently sufficient to overcome his dislike of the two strangers. As he talked he was looking at Groody, particularly, in a bewildered, uncertain, half furious and half admiring way.

"These three swingin' trapezes on the right are for the catchers. Those three are catchers. Them on the left hand side, all five of 'em, are flyers. Watch this; both of 'em are gonna do a forward and a half to the hands."

It was beautiful to watch as two flyers, a girl and a man, started their swings on the two outside trapezes, from the left side. Bodies rigid and straight, they swung as one. From the other side, with timing that had to be exact to the second, the catchers swung on their bars, getting their knees over the bar as they swung, finally hanging with hands down.

Suddenly the two flyers left their bars. A forward somersault and a half, to a perfect catch. A swing back with their catchers, and then, on the downswing, their own bars were swinging down to meet them. The catchers threw them, turning them at the same time, and they caught their own bars and swung back to their pedestals.

"Now you're going to see the greatest woman flyer in the world," stated O'Donnelly, and, as always, his robust tones were loud enough to be heard for a city block. "See that little blonde woman up there, hair high on her head? That's Mame Wardell. I've known her since she was a kid, and was over on the Forewell-Crane show. Listen."

The evening-coated announcer was mounting his box.

"La-a-dies and gentlemen!" he bawled. "We call your particular attention to the next feat. Miss Mamie Wardell will accomplish a trick which has never been successfully imitated by any woman—a double somersault to a hand catch, while blindfolded and tied in a gunny sack!"

Groody removed his cigar slowly.

"Thomas," he said, "I give the lady credit. It's a great trick if she doesn't do it!"

"She's Ed Wardell's wife," O'Donnelly told them. "He'll do the catching."

The entrance from the back yard was to their right, and as the girl up in the heights of the top was being blindfolded and tied in the sack, Groody's eyes took in what looked like a veritable mob of red-coated riders, ready for their turn. Several clowns were lined up, waiting until the feature act was over. There was about them all a suppressed nervousness. They talked some-

what feverishly. Groody could see fingers shaking in emphasis, and fists pounding fists. The troupe was in the grip of apprehensive excitement, and the poisoning of the wonder horse, Sir Martin was like a new message, to them, from some sinister menace which was the more terrible for its mystery.

Groody was aware of a tingling sense of anticipation as he watched the preparations above.

"Thomas, when you get a chance, just figure what it means to put this show up and take it down every day," he remarked. "Look at the rigging for this Wardell act alone."

It was truly impressive. A great oblong frame of steel, with cross bars, was hung and leveled and held by a bewildering maze of wires at the top of the tent. Other guy wires came to the ground. Some red-shirted property boys, of which there were dozens scattered through the tent to remove and set up equipment as needed, were inspecting the pegs and attachments.

"That thing has to be absolutely true and level, too," O'Donnelly pointed out. "If it's the least bit off plumb, all their timin' wouldn't amount to a damn thing, and the flyers'd be thrown hell west and crooked."

MRS. WARDELL was ready now, standing on the raise, a narrow board set a few feet higher than the regular pedestal for the flyers, to give a longer swing.

"You wouldn't think she was the mother o' two strappin' boys in boardin' school, would yuh?" O'Donnelly asked, and his Irish eyes were shining as he waited eagerly for the trick, as eagerly as though he'd never seen it.

She was ready, hands on trapeze. She came hurtling down through the air, slim white body visible below the ugly gunny sack which enclosed her head. On the backswing she nearly reached the sloping canvas roof of the tent, and her second downward arc was made at terrific speed. Back up again, and this time she did touch the tent. Her husband, on the opposite side, had his knees and feet locked through the cables which suspended his trapeze bar.

"Now she goes!" bellowed O'Donnelly, and his voice cut through the tense silence. Not even the band was playing, and it

made taut nerves jump to watch her. "This is her break swing——"

Groody, hat off and cigar in the corner of his mouth, was watching with all his eyes. He saw it as plainly as though he'd been watching for it. One end of the trapeze bar seemed to drop two inches downward as her body started its throw. The hand furthest from the airman, on the side which had dropped, lost its grip. The next second the girl's body, thrown with all the speed of that swing plus her own muscles, was high in the air, turning rapidly——

But so far to one side, toward the two newcomers, that it was no longer over the very narrow net below.

Groody, with his experienced airman-eyes, realized it in a second. The slip of the bar, and the lost grip with one hand, had thrown her to one side.

The crowd sitting at the ends of the net were in a position to see clearly that the blindfolded acrobat would fall, inevitably, on the ground, or one of the stakes, or worse. Shriek after shriek rent the air, like horrid harbingers of the doom to come, and men's choking shouts mingled with them. From high up on the pedestal bar the sobbing wail of two of the girls seemed to reverberate from the canvas walls.

Groody, with a thousand split-second emergencies in the air behind him, seemed to have been shot from a gun as his lanky body hurled itself across the track. And he was not an inch in front of Tom Service. Before Bronk O'Donnelly's oath had fairly left his lips the two were under way.

She fell like a stone, turning over and over.

"Do the best we can!" yelled Groody, measuring her fall with his eye. "Right here!"

Bodies touching, the two stood there, arms upstretched. The stunned crowd was turned to stone. She was turning dizzily as she fell. For just an instant Groody, eyes mere slits and mouth thin and set, wondered how he'd come out of it. He was as cool as an iceberg, and, as usual in emergencies, seemed to be possessed momentarily, with a sort of impersonal detachment.

He saw that they were placed exactly right. In that last split-second of time he grasped Tom's wrists, and shoved his body close to his friend.

She hit on her back. The force of the

fall tore the grip of the airman away, and she split the two bodies and felled them both. A terrific shock rocked Groody to the heels. A terrible, sickening blow somewhere around his heart—and he lost consciousness as infernal din rang through the pain that wracked him.

CHAPTER VII

FEAR

HE CAME to on a cot, and looked around him. He was in a covered wagon. It looked something like a hospital at that.

It was—the hospital wagon. The dark, unshaven doctor of the show so informed him.

"You'll be all right in fifteen minutes," the medico advised him.

He was the only man Groody had seen around the show with a stiff collar and a coat and vest on, save during the performance.

"Don't talk, now; rest a minute," the doctor went on. "Your friend is all right. You got the shock. Mamie wasn't hurt a bit. There's some people outside waiting for you."

Groody lay back and rested, as directed. He didn't feel so well. Physically, that is. But a quizzical smile struggled to the corner of his mouth as he soliloquized:

"Nothing's wasted, maybe. I feel rotten, but Tom and I ought to be able to stay with this show now and not get killed by some of 'em."

He wondered whether the accident was merely an accident. They wouldn't figure it that way, anyhow.

"How'd it happen, Eddie?"

It was Bullion's voice. Like all circus men, accustomed to shouting orders, it carried clearly, a particularly vibrant note in it, as though the executive might possess a good singing voice.

"How'd it happen?" repeated a very high voice excitedly. "Somebody slacked off the main pulley block of the main fly bar, that's what happened! Mame was thrown into a cast position out beyond the net!"

"What do you mean somebody slacked off the main pulley block? It probably slipped."

"Slipped hell!" came that high voice. "And I just inspected everything myself

before the show, and gave it a once over while the horses was on!"

"God almighty!" breathed Bullion. "How's Mame?"

"All right, but we're leavin' this show, Fred! We can't go up there every day scared t' death."

"Shucks, Eddie! We'll put a double set o' guards on your riggin', if yuh say so, and have 'em there from the time the show's set up!"

"I dunno, Fred," Wardell said more quietly. "There's too much happenin', and in our stuff we can't take no chance, you know that. How about last week? When the hook on the main fall slipped from the bail ring? Huh? It caught on the stay rope lashin', o' course, and ripped through that canvas, but the pedestal flops and we all have tuh drop in the net. Them things hadn't oughta happen! The equipment o' this show's on the blink, or——"

"What?"

"Somebody's puttin' it that way!"

"How's Groody?" came a deep voice, and the airman recognized Musselman's tones.

"All right. I'm waitin' t' see him," Wardell said. "Doc says fifteen minutes. He sure saved Mame, along with his pal there."

"Eddie's thinkin' o' takin' his troupes from the show, Musselman," Bullion cut in. "He says somebody slacked off the main pulley block, that he inspected it himself."

"Who?"

"How do I know?" demanded the acrobat truculently. The difference in his voice, as between Bullion and Musselman, made Groody smile grimly—and wonder.

"Who poisoned Sir Martin?" asked Bullion oratorically. "Kate's down on the car, now, cryin' her eyes out. She wants to leave and join the John Robinson outfit. Says she'll go crazy around here. And by God I'm a Chinese punk if I'm not goin' cuckoo myself!"

"Must o' been one o' the property boys, Eddie, if you think it was deliberate."

"Yeah! But which one? Farrell had 'em lined up, and he went through 'em like a bullet through a custard pie! And they all knew nothin' about it, and nobody had nothin' on 'em."

Groody ceased to listen, for a moment. One of the detectives was supposed to work as a property boy during the show, Mus-

selman had told him. There had been too many accidents during the performance. He might have some dope on it. It was surprising to know that the failure of the rigging was laid to deliberate tampering. At that, though, this scared, nervous, overwrought show was liable to lay a thunderstorm to their enemies.

"How's the flyer—that Groody?" came a bellow from afar. "O. K.? 'Lo, Doc. Just seen Mame, Eddie. She's all right—little white yet. Meet Tom Service. He's gonna manage the flyin' circus that's gonna join the show, Eddie. Tom, here yuh see the greatest trainer of acrobatic troupes in the world. He'd be a great showman if he could keep away from the ballet girls and leave whisky alone."

This oration, given with a chuckle in his voice, indicated that Mr. Bronk O'Donnelly was in good humor again. And that Messers. Service and Groody were in good standing with one of the bosses, at least.

Musselman's voice came again.

"Well, Eddie," he said steadily, "if you're determined to leave, why there's nothing we can do. I sympathize with you, and until we can get things straightened out I suppose closing an act like yours is just begging the good Lord to——"

"What do you mean, Musselman?" roared Bullion. "You act like you want to get rid of the Wardell troupe! It's just a matter of watchin' close, and you know it! And without Eddie here this show wouldn't be worth——"

"Listen, Bullion!"

Musselman's deep bass boomed forth in a manner that made Groody's eyes narrow.

"I want the Wardell troupe to stay, of course. But with the show in the condition it is I'll be damned if I'll be responsible for persuading any bunch of people to risk their lives to stay with it! Eddie, I make you two offers. Take your choice. Stay with the show, if your troupe is willing, and we'll watch your rigging like hawks. Or lay off, if the bunch is nervous, which they are, and we'll pay you twenty-five dollars a week apiece until we find out what the hell's going wrong!"

THERE was a moment of silence, during which Groody got slowly to his feet. Musselman was certainly leaning over backwards in an effort to be fair, and to save the star attraction of his

show from jumping elsewhere. That offer to the Wardells, plus his acceptance of Groody's price for the services of himself and Tom, clearly indicated that Musselman was desperate.

"The sky's the limit with him," Groody soliloquized, "and I'll bet he'd give fifty thousand bucks this minute to have his hands on anyone responsible for this stuff—if there is anybody."

He went to the door of the wagon, and was met by a jovial roar from Bronk O'Donnelly, a strong handclasp from stocky, clear eyed Wardell, and miscellaneous congratulations from the others. But to the observant flyer it was obvious that as far as Bullion, O'Donnelly, and Wardell were concerned their sincere gratitude and admiration were still tempered by half distrustful curiosity.

He and Tom were Musselman men, as far as the show was concerned, and that meant that they were not yet accepted at their face value.

The matinee performance was over, and the entire group moved toward the cook tent. The big canvas structure was divided into two parts, one for men only, and the other for the women and married men. Groody, obeying a sudden impulse, turned down Musselman's invitation into the mixed half of the tent, where the table for executives was, and ate at the bosses' table in the men's half. He glanced into the other section, though, and his mouth widened as he took in the scene. The performers who had been such glittering sights in the big top were now wholesome looking women in aprons, and tanned men in stained trousers and flannel shirts open at the neck. It was hard to tell Mygatt, the immaculate equestrian director, from one of the canvasmen.

Bronk O'Donnelly escorted the two newcomers to the bosses' table, where they were introduced to the boss hostler, boss animal man, boss elephant man, boss blacksmith, lot superintendent, the boss of the sideshow, and others. At the next oil-cloth covered table were the assistants. O'Donnelly himself had four; the others each had one.

As Groody consumed the abundance of plain, well cooked food his eyes were taking in the tent, and with every passing moment he became increasingly aware of the fact that the show in its entirety was under a terrific nervous strain. The negroes, in the

rear of the tent, were talking excitedly, and there wasn't a laugh among them. The whites ate silently. The bosses' table seemed to be under a pall, and the unshaven, roughly dressed group of skilled old-timers ate with their eyes on their plates. Bronk O'Donnelly tried without success to arouse them, and finally even his ebullient spirits seemed dampened.

As they came out of the tent to face a crowd of a hundred or so people, "watching the animals eat", O'Donnelly said:

"Don't take that for a fair sample o' troupers, boys. Every livin' soul on a show is superstitious as a coon in a graveyard at midnight—and this stuff's got 'em goin'. They ain't themselves."

He made off to see that the horse tents, which sheltered the hundred and twenty-five iron-gray baggage horses, were coming down all right. The last of the seven hundred employees of the show had scarcely left the cook tent before the tables were being piled on wagons, the steam wagons started under way to the cars and the top itself coming down.

"What do you think, Tom?" queried Groody as they stood in the midway, listening to one of the ticket sellers for the sideshow doing a relief spiel. He was attempting to inveigle the few loungers into the sideshow tent. "Show's sure on the blink, isn't it?"

"In two ways," agreed Service. "These disasters—and the fact that the big boys aren't pulling together. And it may be all hard luck. Let's wait until we look around some more before making up our minds. What time does your train leave?"

"Ten-thirty. I catch the midnight out of Chicago for Indianapolis."

"While things are slack let's run down town and get a shave. I could stand a haircut, likewise. Then we can come back and soak in what we can before you leave. You'd better come along, or everybody on the show'll think you're trying to disguise yourself in whiskers."

CHAPTER VIII

SHOTS IN THE DARK

AN HOUR and a half later they were back on the midway, and now it was thronged with the advance guard of the night crowd. From the sideshow tent came the raucous strains of the

darky orchestra, and a low murmur which indicated a big crowd within. Although there was no spiel going on, a steady stream of people were buying tickets and wending their way into the magic portals.

"Hello, boys! Come and see the big show!"

It was the sideshow ticket taker, standing back at the door, and Groody grinned as he and Tom went past one of the ticket sellers.

"Thought you were on the big top door," Groody told the ticket taker, who, he thought, was the first man on the show he had spoken to, that afternoon.

"No, that's my brother. Want to go in and see——"

"How are ye, gentlemen?"

It was Pop MacDonald, sideshow manager. He was dressed in a blue suit, now, garnished with a cane, and he sat down in a camp chair at the side of the runways into the tent. He brushed off his suit solicitously while his breath wafted the fragrant odor of liquor to the newcomers.

"I always was a fool about clothes," he informed them genially. "Bought this suit in Columbus. Paid a hundred and twenty-five for it, and then it just got to me today. These dark clothes ain't right for a showman, though—get too damn dusty."

Groody and Service squatted beside him as the people filed past at frequent intervals.

"Dressing good has always helped me along, though," Pop resumed. "Back in the old days when I broke in, exhibitin' an eight legged calf, I always dressed good. Plug hat and cane, always."

"How long have you been in the business?" Groody asked him.

"Forty-four years. I'm seventy-two years old."

He didn't look it. There was the light of perpetual youth in his eyes, and something so incurably roguish, almost elflike, about him that when he cocked a humorous eye at his two companions they smiled involuntarily.

"Has this hard luck around the show hit your outfit?" Service asked in low tones.

Pop removed his cigar, and nodded soberly.

"Yes, it has," he said confidentially. "A bunch of it that I lay to the freaks bein'

nervous over one or two little things. I lost a Hawaiian dancer not a week ago, and the one I got now ain't no good. Two of the coons left, too, and they was the best combined band and minstrel act I ever had for the money. Three or four more of 'em are figurin' on screwing, too, I'm sure, and then I'll have to get a whole new outfit."

"What happened?" Service asked him.

"Lot o' little accidents. I got a fellow named Jarvis McKenna. He's a farmer from Indiana that spins a rifle pretty good and has a dancin' monkey besides. Maybe you saw him; wears a turban and big red pants. He thinks the world o' that monkey, fleas and all. And a week ago it was poisoned."

"His daughter's a sword walker. Two days ago she cut her foot bad. Somebody's got hold o' one of her swords and just sharpened it into a safety razor blade. Little things, but combined with the rest that's happening it's got everybody restless as hell. I got one o' the dicks workin' around this tent now for a few days to see what's up."

"Sharpening a sword—can you imagine that?"

"I thought they were supposed to be sharp?"

"They are, like an ordinary carvin' knife that's pretty dull. It's all a fake, you know. Just take a knife and press the edge right down on your hand—straight down, not at an angle. You can't cut yourself. If you put your foot on it easy like and then your whole weight, at right angles, it won't cut. It's the side slash that cuts. But these damn sneaks went and made Marcelle's sword into something terrible, and she got an awful foot. She ain't workin' yet, so I got a ballet girl to do it."

"Suspect anybody?"

Pop shook his head, his eyes morose behind their Foxy Grandpa glasses.

"Want to go in and see the show?" he inquired. "Come on in."

"We'd like to meet this detective, too," Service informed him.

Inside there was a close packed mob of people, listening to the last of the combined band and minstrel show, consisting of four and six men. The adenoidal lecturer moved them to the next exhibit, where an old Yankee and his stout, motherly looking wife had a display of remarkable wood-

carving. Then on to the fat girl, who sat enthroned in state in the middle of the tent.

"Got her on a farm in Ohio last year," Pop informed them. "Had a hell of a good fat girl before, but she and the cooch dancer got into a hair pullin' match and I had to fire 'em both. Eva here turned out all right though. She can troupe."

The lecturer was now in front of the knife thrower's stand, doing his spiel.

"Pretty good lecturer," Pop told them. "That's his little girl, in the Scotch costume over there on that platform. Does a Scotch dance. His wife's wardrobe woman. See that woman albino over there? Ain't she pretty? Educated, too, and a fine woman. Got her out on the coast. She'd never been in show business. Fine woman. Makes her sore as hell to be asked whether she's the wife o' that man albino next to her. He's a simple squirt. Any time you want to get lit on, just ask her that. Every day somebody primes a bunch o' people to ask her that."

"Let's see the knife throwing," suggested Groody.

The knife thrower was a huge man, dressed in cowboy style with a sombrero which could have done emergency duty as a show top. His wife, a buxom woman, was against the board and he held a bunch of wooden-handled knives in his hand as the lecturer concluded:

"Watch closely, ladies and gentlemen, observe every move, and then think what you have seen!"

"That's a cinch," Pop informed them. "Anybody can throw knives after a little practice. You don't have to know how low or high they hit—just that they'll go in a straight line. Anybody can do that. I've fired more knife throwers and substituted myself than a monkey has fleas."

A knife whistled through the air, and stuck quivering about six inches from the woman's body. The thrower looked a little surprised.

Another, and a wild scream rang through the tent. The knife thrower leaped forward, and jerked the knife from the fleshy part of his wife's arm. She was half fainting as women screeched and the crowd, awestruck, burst into a bedlam of excited sound.

"The handle o' the knife come off, damn it!" grated Pop, and in a split second was threshing his way through the crowd.

"The lady is not hurt, ladees and gentlemen!" bellowed the lecturer. "She will be attended in a few seconds by our own doctor. Forget this unfortunate incident, which goes to prove how, day in and day out, night in and night out, the artists of this great circus risk their lives to entertain you! I next call your attention to Paulopolis, the tallest giant in the world, measuring seven feet and six inches from the top of his head to the soles of his socks, imported from Austria for your delectation and——"

"Let's see what's up," Groody threw to Service, and Tom nodded.

THE woman had been removed from the platform, and back into a storeroom at the rear of the tent, where she was stretched on a cot. There was a tight bandage around her arm. In addition to her husband and MacDonald, there were two other men.

Evidently she was not badly off. The knife had clipped her, that was all, but she was bleeding profusely. Her husband, his broad, fleshy face evil to look at, had more than a dozen knives in his hand.

And he was swearing slowly, methodically, with blood-chilling effect, as he examined knife after knife, jerking at their handles.

About one out of three came off in his hand!

"That ruins the knife throwing, see?" Service was saying quietly, but his round blue eyes were opened widely, and there were curious lights in them. His glasses seemed to scintillate. "Throws 'em off balance. He might have put one in her heart!"

MacDonald saw them, and motioned them over. His wrinkles were deeper, his black eyes muddy and opaque.

"Git the idea?" he said abruptly, and the two new showmen nodded.

"Now what low-down, dirty skunk done that thing?"

"The same one that fixed Marcelle's swords!" grated the knife thrower. "And by God——"

"Here's the doctor."

It was, and he got to work silently, without asking a question. The knife thrower went on as though he had not been interrupted:

"I'm quittin' this jinx outfit, and I'm

quittin' now. Can't do anything, can't find out anything, everybody a snake in the grass."

"I can do somethin'," declared a tall, gaunt, bony faced man with a fishy eye and a bald head.

"He's the detective," MacDonald told them. "The other feller is Monty Jones, my boss canvasman."

"Boy, he looks hard," murmured Service as he looked at the detective.

The operative was dressed roughly, and hadn't shaven in days. Furthermore, he was dirty physically, and his clothes were not clean. That, however, was all in the makeup of his part as a canvasman.

"What do you mean? You know something?"

"I think I do. Give me time, and if we get this rat we'll be gettin' somewhere."

The knife thrower snorted.

"Who the hell are you?" he spat.

"I'm just a canvasman, brother, but I got eyes," retorted the detective. "Are you blamin' me because I'm tryin' to——"

"No. I'm—kind of wrought up, I guess."

Without a word the detective started out. A thin, very black negro boy, with small eyes but a curiously hilarious expression seemingly planted permanently on his face, lifted the back wall slightly and looked in.

"Mistuh MacDonald, sah! Can I see you?"

"MacDonald!"

It was the detective's whisper. He spoke hastily to the old showman.

"Let me get him before you talk to him. Don't ask me why now."

"Sure," agreed MacDonald. "But——"

"You Hiram, I want to see you," the detective said as he walked toward the side-wall.

"Mistuh MacDonald, I wants to see nobody but you."

"Look here."

Somewhere in his dirt-caked clothes the detective evidently had his badge. The negro's eyes widened, and in a second the detective had jerked him, none too gently, into the darkness outside. The tent wall fell, and for a moment there was a rumble of voices without, which gradually disappeared.

"That may spill the beans," Service remarked thoughtfully. "That dick gave away his identity."

"Perhaps he had to," Groody pointed out, "to get any action. He must have something on this bird. Maybe the job'll be done before we get started. It's a hell of a thing to say, but were I anything but a sterling character I'd be sorry. Get one guy and especially a nigger, and the rest of the thing'll unwind by itself."

"Suppose that Hi nigger's been fiddlin' around this show?" Pop MacDonald asked them as his now bright old eyes flickered from one to the other. "He's been kind of bad medicine around, but he's the best trombone player I ever got for five bucks a week and his keep."

"How bad?"

"Messing around one of the girls, the drummer's wife, and fighting. Three times he's stayed in town, running after some coon he met, but I got him back because he can make more noise on the ballyhoo than any three men. Him and the drum, behind the stand, lets all the rest get in ahead and be ready to smack it when the spiel's over. I——"

From some distance it came, and the little group of people in the storeroom stiffened. It was a wail of utter terror.

Then the crack of a gun, and Groody was leaping for the sidewall. A second, as a loud voice yelled.

"Stop, damn you, or I——"

A third report as the flyer, followed by Service, was stumbling over the guy ropes, bound through the blackness for the place where the shots had come from.

"Over here, boys!"

It was the detective's voice, over near the fringe of trees which rimmed the lot. And at his feet was the motionless body of the negro, shot through the heart.

"Pulled a razor on me—see it?" the gaunt, hard-boiled sleuth told them.

It was laying near the limp hand of the bleeding black man. There were men running from the direction of the big top, now, and Groody could hear Bronk O'Donnelly's roar:

"That was shootin', I tell yuh!"

"How come?" MacDonald questioned.

"I seen this nigger messing around those knives while the freaks were at supper tonight. Didn't think anything of it," the detective told them. "When Mike here stuck his wife I was pretty sure of what had happened, and when some of the rest of the knives were bad, I knew. I took

Hi out of the tent and put it right up to him. First he denied it, but I was watching him close and he pulled this razor, makes a cut at me, and then starts running as I jumped for him. I didn't aim to kill him, but I had to. Thought I'd shoot him down. Just wound him, I mean. But he can't talk now."

There was a group of twenty tense showmen around now, and Groody said swiftly: "Make it just a fight—don't give yourself away for who you are now."

"Of course not. Say, are you trying to give me any instructions in this business?" "No."

Now two local policemen were on the scene, and Musselman. Service was at Musselman's side, making a suggestion. And Musselman, his strong face dark and lowering, nodded briefly.

"Everybody get out of here except Bronk. MacDonald, and Service and Groody and Hatwell here. Come on—beat it!"

The canvasmen and sideshow people, including Jones, the sideshow boss, left slowly. The detective revealed his identity to the excited policemen, then, and told his story.

When the sergeant had heard it complete he said:

"Well, that's all right, but we've got to run you in. You can put up a bond and get free, all right, and the case'll be dismissed, of course, at the end if everything's all right."

"Was he running when you shot him?" Service asked the detective.

"Not exactly. He'd just turned and was starting when I shot first. He kept on, and must have been eight or ten feet away when the second shot got him."

"That isn't far," ruminated Service. "I wish to hell you hadn't killed him. Now the thing to do, of course, is to put it up to the other niggers, especially, as just a fight, so they won't suspect anything. Get me? Probably one or two of the others'll bear watching."

"No harm done," MacDonald said positively, "but I don't think so. Hi here was a kind of an outlaw in the troupe. I don't believe there's a man or woman in it that would go partners with him. No man, anyhow. Maybe the women—he was a kind of Romeo, and you knows these darkies."

"Well, let's go down and have the hearing," Musselman said incisively. "Hatwell, I'll be prepared to put up the bond, of course. Cash bail, I mean. Officer, you'll get an ambulance or something?"

"Bill's over phoning now. Sure."

Jack Farrell appeared as though by magic from the darkness, and listened to the story quietly, his frosty eyes probing Hatwell's prominent green ones steadily.

"Better switch you out of the sideshow, and have a new man in there," he said evenly. "And watch the coons."

GROODY and Service said nothing, but merely observed matters until the corpse, Hatwell, and Musselman had disappeared. The knife thrower went, too, as a witness. Farrell and Bronk O'Donnelly had to hurry back to the golden walled big top, where the show was in full swing now, and the two oil men walked back to the sideshow with MacDonald.

"Now ain't that a hell of a note? Maybe Hi was sore at the world, but he never had any words with the knife thrower. If there's any organized gang pecking at this show, they hired Hi as a helper. Tough luck he was killed."

"Hatwell shot too fast," stated Groody, "And too straight."

"But alone at night with a bad nigger and a razor—you can't blame him," suggested Service.

"And the blasted crooks were willing to have a man kill his own wife by accident, just to keep this show on edge!" raved MacDonald, and for a full moment he blasphemed with a fluency and savage sincerity which, somehow, was horrible, coming from that genial, kindly little old man.

In the chapters to come, the menace which has so mysteriously paralyzed a great circus marks Groody for its victim.



*An Uproarious Yarn of Three
Cowboys Far from Home*

THE GYPSY GYP

By ANTHONY M. RUD

PLATEMOUTH and me and Boley ain't been in Palo Verde more than three drinks and a long chaser of water, when Ed Randolph, round shouldered and red nosed, with ink stains on his drooping yaller mustache, come in through the swing door.

He's carrying an armload of papers, and now he strips one loose and lays it on the bar. "Evenin', gents," he says low and mournful, at the same time planking down a half dollar and a dime. "A pint," he groans to the barkeep.

Keno Williams obliges, and scoops in the silver. But there ain't any of us says much more than howdy to Ed, and we let him stalk on away, knowing the symptoms. Till he's wrapped himself around his second daily pint, Ed would give the graveyard gloomies to a laughing jassack. And he don't ever treat; jest ponies up his sixty cents twice a day, and then goes back to the shack where he keeps his *etaoins* and *octus* and other peculiar critters what make the weekly *Vindicator* a sorta mystery story.

For the time it takes to absorb three-

four drinks nobody bothers about the paper Ed has delivered. But then Platemouth wanders off, a bottle and a glass in his hand, and goggles at the paper.

Boley and me drink. By this time we're getting sorta consolidated, anyway, and don't care a hoot if Platemouth don't want to be sociable. Keno's got a chile bar down to the other end of the broken up, warped old dance floor, where a fat, marijuana-doped Mex woman sells tamales, chile, sandwiches and such.

When we get there, old Maria is snoozed down, snoring mild and weary like. Boley knows the ropes. He goes back, coggles a blunt spur across her bare feet, and then steps back as she yowls and starts to get up on her hind laigs to find the snake what bit her.

Boley grins, and winks at me. I notice he ain't quite steady on his pins. "If you want money's worth, take ham—ham shan-wish," he whispers.

It's all right with me, even if ham kept in a place like this ain't my election usually. I'm plumb amiable. Ham it is.

Maria sulls and glares some, but she has

got her positive orders to treat gringo customers good. I see her cut the ham. This is what Boley meant. Being glass eyed and trembly from that greaser dope, she don't slice ham—she massacres it! I get a crazy wedge weighing about a quarter of a pound; and Boley gets darn near as much. And the tariff is a small bit for the two!

Still munching, ten minutes later, we get back to the bar. It has been a long journey, the floor all of a sudden getting pretty steep. Boley trips once and goes down; but by setting down alongside, and proping him, I manage to get him up. Then he gives me a hand in turn.

"Hey, Band-Ear," hails Platemouth. "C'mere."

He sounds serious; not even a little bit ossified. It's thataway often; when a jigger gets interested about something, likker don't seem to take holt for a while.

"Right with you," I promises—and makes good. By holding to the bar, I reach him, though I leave Boley setting on one of Keno's dented brass spittoons, cogitating on the powerful effect a waddy can get outa a nickel's worth of ham. "Now ef I'd jes stuck to ham—" he argues reproachful with himself.

Platemouth has got the four page *Vindicator* wide open at the middle, and spread out. On one side is a wild and woolly yarn I been reading part by part. It's about a fella and a girl who go hell-hooting all over Europe, forking one of these here autocars what run without winding; and it's called "The Lightning Conductor". It's a whale of a yarn, though of course I don't believe it much.

"Bang-Ear," says Platemouth, "what in heck is a 'eccentric millionaire manufacturer'?" And he pokes a finger at the headline on the patent inside page opposite from Part VI of my autocar story.

I read:

**ECCENTRIC MILLIONAIRE MANUFACTURER
WANTS SON BACK**

It's got me grabbing leather. Holding on to Platemouth, I manage to make out that the old coot, whose picture is printed there, is looking for a wife and younker he got sore at and kicked out into the cold, cold world a while back. But what this here eccentric thing is old Waldo manufactures, I dunno.

We consult Boley. And setting on the spittoon don't seem to injure his imagination none. "Sure," he tells us solemn. "Eccentrics is ver-y vallyble. Part of a steam engine. You know, the piston—well, that ain't it. Nope."

He shakes his head and immediately gets so dizzy he falls off the spittoon.

"Nope," he denied even more emphatic, and gets up.

"A eccentric is a piston inside out," Boley elucidates. "It goes jes' t'other way. An' it's got two steel balls—go roun' an' roun'—call 'em guv'nor. Faster—balls lift. Goin' real fast—all balled up. See?"

• "Red crème de mint," orders Platemouth, planking some silver on the bar. "An' serve that there fellow way over to that far table—there. Yeah, I know I already got a drink. So's Bang-Ear. Gotta have crème de mint—the red kind—for chasher. Always use chasher after bar whisky."

I nod. It's a fact. Fella don't really appreciate a ham sandwich till he dilutes it with whisky and red crème de mint chasers.

First thing I know, we're all back to that far table. Boley's asleep, but he don't count. Platemouth reads me a touching piece about how this here Grover Waldo gent, a long while back, catches his wife dancing what the paper anyway, calls a schottische; and, being ramrod-backed, real religious and a deacon in the church, he orders her out of his house. "The sinful schottische!" wails Platemouth; and a tear drops in his crème de mint.

Waldo's woman goes—but she takes the five year old boy along. And all the old gent can do never does get him his son back. Now he says he'll forgive and forget; and that he's learnt something they call the "Boston Dip", and sees the error of his ways. He supposes that by now the erring wife has paid the supreme penalty for causing him this sorrow; but if not, he ain't going to welsh. He'll take her back, and not even horsewhip her. And he's made nine-ten millions since she went away, too.

"D'yuh reelize," Platemouth says solemn and portentous, poking a finger into my wishbone, "that mebbe I was that li'l geezer?" And he shows me that smudgy picture of a kid with yaller curls—the paper says they're yaller. "An' me, who never knew no home and mother!"

"No, nor father, neither," I admit prac-

tical. "An' no fetchin' up—except on whang leather."

Maybe it's because I'm setting down, but I seem to be thinking clearer. And a great idea dawns. Nine million dollars ain't to be sneezed at. And why can't Platemouth and me and Boley grab it off?

It takes me a while, and two-three more of Platemouth's double-headers, before I get it all worked out. But then it's a cinch, if only Boley don't balk on being the Gypsy. We gotta have a Gypsy, and Gypsies are dark complected. Boley comes nearest, and besides, he's snoring. We can work on him.

Once I got Platemouth sold, the rest is easy. I get some axle grease from Dan Covey's shed back of the Palace, and work some brown varnish into it with a paddle. But I have to use my hands in smearing it thin over Boley's face and body—Platemouth having pried off all his clothes while I was getting the grease.

IT REALLY wasn't so bad, once we got in the express car and grab a good sleep. Boley, on waking up, was real bothered over having to be the Gypsy who had took care of Waldo's runaway woman, until Platemouth slipped him a good stiff morning's morning, a half a pint. Then Boley saw a faint glimmering of the joke. He grinned, and looked real tough, with that red bandanna around his forehead, the white silk shirt, and purple plush *fiesta* pants we got for him. With his greasy hair, and dark greased skin, if he didn't look like a Gypsy chief, I never seen one.

"But why ain't *you* jiggers in uniform, too?" he wants to know. Platemouth an' I ain't changed clothes.

"Because Bang-Ear an' me planned it!" comes back Platemouth. "You wasn't present to vote, so I done took yore proxy. And that made it unanimous; right in the middle of the meeting you went plumb Gypsy! If you wasn't so necessary, I'd be real ashamed of you, waddy!"

"Well, what the heck makes my face kinda draw when I turn my head?" wails Boley. He ain't got any real scrap in him—yet.

"Shucks, it's yore heathenish complexion," I tells him, careful not to spill a word about that there quick drying varnish; which same is getting its work in, spite of the axle grease. "An' now listen! When

we gets to Denver an' goes to that millionaire's ranch——"

So from then on I tells him the rest of the deep dark design we got against the nine million dollars of Mister Grover Eccentric Waldo.

I'll say this much for Boley Lynn; when he sets his back to the plow he don't never turn forward. So I kinda sigh in relief when he shrugs and reaches for the new opened bottle. Sorta to christen hisself, I reckon.

"Whe-ew!" he gasps and chokes. "Did you put a whole package of fine cut in that?" Platemouth has the Oregon habit of stuffing two-three pinches of chewing tobacco into each new bottle of Bourbon. Him never having been within a thousand miles of Oregon, this musta come to him plumb natural.

"No, jest a pinch," denies Platemouth; and then to prove it, he up-ends the quart, gargling long and high and handsome.

"Hey, that's enough!" I caution. "You can't get drunk!"

"I can't, huh?" he glares. "I wanna know why not? I got mouth, I got bottle, and I got stummick, ain't I?"

"Yeah, but—" I see his hangover is getting a swell start.

"S'all a cow nurse needs. I knew an Englisher onc't. Bradley; you 'member, owned part of the Cross-Pipe Stencil. Bradley, he was plumb fancy. He drunk good whisky outa a tall glass, an' splashed down fizzwater into it. The fizzwater made it go up my nose. Now, who'n'ell wants whisky up his nose?"

Not knowing any such critter, I admit the force of his augering, and take my own turn at the sustainer.

"But look-a-here, Bang-Ear," puzzles Boley. "D'you want me to be a real wild an' gyppin' Gypsy, or jest quiet an' some civilized?"

"Medium wild. Jest about half broke an' hellious."

"Then I gotta drink the rest this bottle," he says firm, an' takes a good half of what's left.

"Of course you can't talk puncher lingo." I goes on, realizing we're getting most to Denver, and struck by a chilly sorta thought. "Sa-ay, d'you happen to know any Gypsy?"

"Me?" He looks up surprised. "Hell no! I can jabber some Yaqui, an' can cuss

eloquent in six other languages, includin' the Scandahoovian——"

"No cussing," I caution. "He's prob'ly high-toned, this Waldo fella. S'pose you stick to Yaqui; he ain't liable to savvy that. An' I'll be interpreter."

"What's a interpreter?" Platemouth wants to know.

"Well, you see, Boley he don't know no English. So he——"

But Boley has got part of his own second day lift. He jumps in front of me, grinning—an' nearly goes down as the train swings fast around a curve.

"*O wotan as siam, presto spondulica jiblets*," says he, wobbly but emphatic, using a sorta neo-Gypsy lingo hard to classify, as old Jedge Clarke would put it.

"That means," I interpret real dignified, "we aim to den in Denver. Shucks, I oughta sing that, but I ain't got my music along."

"An' am I s'posed to speak that lingo too?" Platemouth grins, making a pass at the telescope bag where we've got our last bottle, but missing the handle about six inches as the train lurches sideways.

"No, you ain't. Is he Boley? Nope. Boley says no, too. Y'see, this here Gypsy, he went an' fell for pore Miz Waldo, so at a very early age he sent you to yale."

"Yale?" says Boley. "Hell, thass a college. Yuh don't go there till yuh been through sixth grade, an' all that." He waves vaguelike, indicating education-at-large.

I shake my head. "This different sort—sorta yale," I tells him. "It's run by Skandahoovian sheriff like Nels Anderson down to Piñal."

That has him grabbing leather a minute or so; so I sit down dignified and edge over to where the telescope bag and our last bottle is.

ONCE into Denver, we aim for the Silver Star, looking for information. We're all sobered some, owing to me holding onto the bottle the last three-four hours, and all of us grabbing some shuteye. Nobody's got a lot to say; only Platemouth allows in a sorta growl the reason he feels so submarine low is because them two-three drinks he's had ain't been chased adequate. I see they didn't teach arithmetic at the yale he went to.

On we plod, glum and kinda weaving when we dodge them rampaging hoss cars what run up and down the streets on rails. But at the Silver Star—a place we'd heard of on account it was a place big cowmen hung out, times they brung in shipments of cattle—things brighten up considerable. It's only four o'clock in the afternoon, so there ain't any big crowd, jest a few fellas in city clothes, and one bleary eyed cow gent in overalls and Stetson. We get service.

According to custom, the first drink for visiting cow waddies is on the house. I make it a Tom Collins, same being cool and long. Boley, who horns in spite of his disguise, elects a rum punch. Platemouth decides on a schooner of dark beer—with a green crème de mint chaser. And more than that, he denominates the same chaser for Boley and me.

I dish my chaser, however, taking care nobody sees. Sweet stuff like that never did tickle me none. And mebbe I'm right, because ten minutes later I'm left alone, while Boley and Platemouth make a fast weaving and sprint for somewhere out back. I don't give a hoot. It gives me a chance to ask some questions confidential of the barkeep.

And that's why we finally get to a great big house built right up on a rock terrace, with the land sloping down, and all brown with grass that's dried out.

It's a funny house, square, and made out of red brick, with a little cupola setting up on top. And the front stairs go way to the second story. We climb, and I make Boley take off his spurs afore we ring the bell.

Platemouth snakes out his six-shooter, and is going to rap good and hard with the butt, until I catch his arm. "No, wait a second," I tell him. "See, all we gotta do is poke this." And I push a finger against a bell button what's all surrounded by curly ironwork.

He looks at me kinda funny. "Yuh mean to stan' there an' tell me, Bang-Ear Eckells, that them inside'll hear that measly little tap? Hell, I didn't even hear it m'self! Yo're smart, Bang-Ear, but I don't——"

That second the door swings open slow and impressive. A medium tall, but heavy and impressive jigger stands there, all blue and white, and with red yarn on his

sleeves and shoulders. He's sorta double-breasted, vertically speaking, and he's let his hair grow down along front of his ears, clear to his chops, which is plenty fat. They hang like a turkey's wattles.

"I beg your pahdon?" says he, talking like he's got a mouthful of mush.

"No offence took," I answer generous. "We aim to see——"

But Platemouth, after gaping a second, opens wide his arms, and rushes. "Father!" he yells, and rushing, tries to clinch.

Mebbe he ain't jest as good a jedge of distance as usual, or mebbe the old gent ain't expecting to be reckernized. Anyway, down they go, with a crash what shook the floor. Platemouth's shoulder sinks down eight-ten inches in the old man's waistline, bringing forth a gasp of escaping breath. And then he goes jelly-like, and his eyes roll back.

"Gollewhiz, now yuh done it!" wails Boley, forgetting all his Gypsy lingo, in the excitement. "Yuh kilt him!"

But I find out pretty quick the old fella ain't dead—jest whacked too solid in his sole perplexity. He begins to grunt and wheeze. "Now's our time!" I whisper, plenty agitated. "Get a-going! Old Waldo . . ."

"I'm 'Old Waldo'!" comes a grim sorta voice from the doorway. "Who are you three, and what in tarnation have you been doing to James? James, get up!"

"Ug-ug-awk!" throttles out James, pop-eyed and wiggling one foot; but we don't pay him no attention. Not any. There in the doorway, holding a lifesized cannon with the hammer at full cock, is a wispy little guy with white hair and mustachios. He's kinda pale, and his shoulders don't square off like mebbe once they did. But he's got silvery eyes like two shots of rock and rye with the rye left out.

"Huh, I—we, I mean—" I try to explain why we come, an' particular why we seem to be perpetrating murder and mayhem on old Waldo's friend, James; but somehow my tongue don't track. I stutter.

Boley rushes to the rescue—honest, I hand it to him! "*Kutterafojas di whem-gubble kak ek looroolooey!*" he protests indignant, pressing front and center to come atween old Grover an' me. The boy is on his lines. Mebbe we can pull outa this yet.

I shamble up, dignified as a tailed-up steer and twice as natural. "I'm the blame interpreter. You see, he's Gypsy. He brung up yore son, until I got him on my little cow ranch." I thought that was sufficient, if not smooth.

"Oh indeed!" says Waldo. "So this one claims to be my son. And what is the circus all about?" He points with a jump of his gun muzzle, towards Boley Lynn.

Boley leaps three feet sideways, and lets go some more Gypsy-Yaqui-Hooey.

"What was it he told me just a minute ago?" asked Waldo, putting away his gun. I'll swear he grinned; but seeing that cocked six-gun go up on a shelf back there outa sight, relieved me a lot.

"'Yore quarrel is with me, not them,' he was aiming to say," I elucidate, translating that mebbe Gypsy talk. "He's scairt you aim to salivate him, on account of him marrying yore woman over the Gypsy tongs. But you see——"

"Yes, maybe I do," broke in Waldo crisp. "And is he living with Irma now?"

I shakes my head and sighs. "Poor Irma passed out three year back."

"I see. Umm-hmm! Yes, that accounts for it."

"For what?" I don't jest savvy.

"Why he's got so much grease in him now. If Irma was alive she'd keep him scorched to a crackling. No, you tell your Gypsy friend that there are no hard feelings. None at all."

But he don't give me a chance to jabber. Turning to the fat boy in uniform he says sharp, "James, have we got a room or two left?"

James, who's up on his pins but still kinda groggy, admits reluctant mebbe they have.

"Then show these gentlemen to them. The usual service, you understand. And now I shall leave you, boys. This—er—revelation has been something of a shock to me, you surely realize. Nerves are bad. But I shall expect you to dinner with me—all of you."

With that he bows, and disappears. I'll swear he's grinning wicked!

BOLEY and Platemouth are walking on air, as they foller that grumpy, wheezy bag of mush they call James. They figger everything's rosy, even if the old duck ain't exactly fell on their necks.

Me, I got doubts. Some things Waldo said hadn't sounded like they come from the heart.

"Blame if I don't kinda cotton to yore dad," confides Boley in a whisper, for a second forgetting his rig-up as Gypsy.

Platemouth gasps, and his mouth looks like it's turning his head plumb inside out. James turns and hands Boley a fishy eye. I have to do something, but I don't rightly know what.

"You see?" I exclaim, trying to sound triumphant. "If you jest didn't mislay all you learned, when yuh get excited, you could talk an' understand English pretty near as good as anybody."

"Yes, sir-r-r?" slurs Boley, doing his best to cover up. "*Blak-amac-hijo cuestas honzorano.*"

"*Mummety-peg,*" I deny stern.

There mighta been more, but jest then Mister James pulled one that's still got me hanging to the horn. We come to a little glass door in the hall, but it was a door what didn't have no knob. On the frame was three pearl buttons, like electric door bell buttons, only fancier. I savvy door bells, having seen them once I was to Tucson. But this contraption is a heck of a lot fancier.

James, breathing audible but not saying a word, punches one of them buttons; and then we wait, wondering what's up. By and by there's a muffled sorta clank; and James, he pushes another button.

Right away that little door slithers back!

Inside is a little gilt barred cell, like they'd have for solitary confinement in hell, mebbe. I look at it, plumb suspicious; but Boley and Platemouth troop right in regardless.

"After you," wheezes James. And I think I hear him add, under his breath, something like, "Bloody bounder!" Whatever mebbe that means; I'm turning thirty-five, and there ain't quite the elastic spring in me that once there was.

I don't like the layout, so I act quick. Grabbing James around the middle, I give the rush. He goes in first, and I follow. Like I thought, his first act is to punch a button inside that little cell, and slide the door to.

Then something happens. Maybe I'm wrong; but when James, who's got real mad and snorting, pokes another button, I swear to the great Hijackers my stum-

mick curls way down around my knees. We go *up!* How it's done I dunno, but I give my range word that whole little gilt cell started upstairs, only there weren't no stairs. Of course you'll call me a liar, especial when I tell you a button was punched, the door slid open—and we looked at a different layout complete. It *wasn't the place we'd left*; it was two floors up! And we hadn't clumb a single stair.

Some day when I've been sober more than usual, say for two-three weeks, I aim to ask Jim Orville—my Big Auger on the O-in-a-Box—what that heap medicine was. I know damn well it wasn't any of James' magic doings. If he was that good, he'd of killed all three of us off, a inch at a time. He liked us about the way a roulette house gambler likes a night the two-three zeros is taking a vacation in the upper air.

But he takes us down a wide, soft footed hall and into a room, where a door leads into another room. A double and a single. When James goes, however, the outside door goes *click!* I don't like it. I try the handle—and it's locked! Somehow I kinda expected as much. Without saying anything, I sneak through and try the door of the small room; but that's locked, too. I look out the window, and see it's thirty feet down, or mebbe more, and us without a rope.

A few minutes later there's a grating and a click at the door of the small room. I'm plumb sober by now, and wondering jest what the heck is up. I ain't told my compadres nothing about this last development; they has plenty to talk about, figgering what really happened to that gilt cell what riz upstairs on us.

"It was hauled up by ropes!" I hear Boley maintain. Like me he has gone pretty nigh cold sober, probably on account of the excitement.

When I investigate the noise, I get a sorta agreeable shock. The door is jest slamming shut hurried like, but there on the floor is three glasses setting on a tray! Aside the glasses is a full bottle of tall and narrer shape, a corkscrew, and one of these here seltzer shoot-'em-Sammies, glistening with cold sweat on the glass.

Well, locked in or not, we sure can recognize a friend, particular in liquid form. During the next half hour—the bottle proving up as Three Star Hennessy—we

gets plumb good-natured towards old Grover Waldo, and even wishes something less than green rawhide and a hot sun for friend James.

During the solemn ceremonies of pouring, Platemouth, who's too reckless to trust with a bottle, discovers there's two-three windows on the floor below, where guys are poking their heads out and cussing each other venomous. Platemouth finds out the combination of that seltzer siphon, leans out, and shoots one of them cussers in the back of the neck.

"Ho-ho-ho!" bellows Platemouth, turning to tell us. But his laugh don't last. Not any. At that he's lucky.

Wham! Tinkle, tinkle.

From below, the squirted guy has turned around and let loose with a gun. And in Platemouth's hands a high pressure bottle of fizz suddenly explodes. *Krrummmmp!*

"Ug-ugh—Gawd—I—c'mere Bang-Ear! I'm plumb diluted!" He gargles. "Gimme a drink. I——"

"Spit out the glass fust!" I tell him. And then, him obeying thorough, I give him a swaller outa my tumbler, though right quick I see he don't need so much more.

He wags his head and starts to sniffle. "I don't care, they's suthin' strange about this house!" he mourns, meditative. "Never did I expect to see the day a bottle would explode all by itself." Yeh, his hangover has come back.

I don't pay any more attention to him. He's disgracefully drunk; don't even know he's been shot at! Who am I to disillusion him?

IT'S maybe an hour after that, when James come up after us. By then the lights, which we've punched on and off lots of times, is swaying; an' the carpet is squirming under my feet. I ain't quite sober.

But we go down, forking that funny gilt cell with the punch buttons. And, first being asked for our guns—we'd left our'n up in the rooms, all except one I always hangs under my left arm—we was led into a big room where a big chuck table is set.

That table is all snow white cloth, glittering glass, and real silver, with three branching candlesticks giving the light. Me, I sorta wonder why Waldo, with all his spondulix, don't loosen up and get electricity.

But I ain't really got any kick coming. Being some illuminated myself, I see two flames on the end of every candle. So that makes the room most as bright as day, you might say.

What grabs me hard and immediate, though, is the gang Waldo's got there—seven of the toughest looking eggs I ever draped an eye on. They ain't cowpokes. Most is city dudes, but only one the flossy kind. He's a big, red nosed, sandy mustached varmint with a black coat, striped pants, and rings on his fingers. I figger he's got a gold brick hid under the tail of his trousers. Then there's a little rat of a guy, shifty eyed, in a gray jersey, with his coat buttoned tight. And the other five might of been bum prizefighters, cops in plain clothes, or anything like that.

They're all standing up behind their chairs, scowling hard at some little cards what have been set around to each place. Something ain't pleased them a bit; and it's plain they don't like each other none, and us still less if any.

"Henry the Eighth, this is your place," says Waldo courteous to Platemouth, pointing out a chair. "And here, Mr. Eckells. And here, Big Chief Romany Chal." The last is for Boley, who's gone bug-eyed.

"The names and numbers are purely chronological, you understand," goes on Waldo smooth. "Please be seated. My son's name was Henry; and so in the order you came back to me I have named you Henry the First, Second and so forth. So don't attach any sinister significance to a combination like Henry the Eighth, for instance."

"These other bums ain't only impostors, Daddy!" growls rednose, whose card names him Henry the Sixth.

"Tush! Tush!" admonishes Waldo. "Let us not criticize each other this early in the evening, Henry. Let all be amity. Of course I am aware that my dear, departed Irma did *not* present me with octuplets, twenty years ago this morning; yet withal, desiring to be my son indicates, to me at least, the yeasting of a worthy ambition. So let us not judge each other harshly—not now, at any rate."

That was hifalutin' talk, only part of which I get right then. But immediate come a gang of waiters, bringing little fancy drinks. Yellowish they was, sorta wry tast-

ing, and a undernourished green prune sunk to the bottom of each. I drunk mine, though it wasn't so good; but the prune must of had dyspsy. I took one bite, then waited till the waiters come again, and snipped it off my thumb. It jest missed a waiter with two heads, going somewheres between.

The supper goes on. Most of it is kinda misty to me, and likewise to Platemouth and Boley. We're sure old Waldo done most the talking, shutting up any Henry who got to shooting off his mouth, and telling us yarns about the tricks little bony fidy Henry used to play twenty-two-three years back.

There is all sorts of vittles, dished up a dab at a time; and there's fizzy wine after a while, a pint bottle to each man. It sorta tickles, but don't seem to have a hell of a lot of authority. Piper Heidseick they calls it; and I remember having an argument with Platemouth as to whether it was named after the tobaccy, or vicy versy, and if so, why.

But the grub comes and goes—not so much of it inside of me. Not until they bring something they calls “filly mean yawn”. Mebbe that's a dirty dig at Platemouth, who spears his all to once, and dumps it in his head cavern, where it don't interrupt traffic none to speak of.

I discover that all the stuff is, is beef—but what swell, tender beef it is! I eat three of them, finishing the pint of Piper, before the hiccups commences. After that I ain't hungry so much.

At the end Waldo stands up, holding his glass. We all do the same—except two-three of us aim to, and don't make the grade first try. My head feels as though it's way, way high up above the floor, and swelling fast. But third time, I make it.

“To the *real* Henry Waldo, wherever he may be!” toasts old Grover, and drinks his glass, the first he's had. “And now, gentlemen, I shall leave you to yourselves with the dessert. My doctor does not allow me to eat rich desserts. You are at liberty to discuss which one of yourselves is the real Henry. Gentlemen, if you will excuse me?”

And with that he goes back through the doorway what I reckon leads to the kitchen. The waiters come in, bringing coffee, and a little plate on which is something looks like a eggcup upside down. They get out

quick, but click the door wide open. And almost immejit an ugly growl starts on the other side the table, where the five ex-pugs are setting. Each guy has lifted his eggcup, you see.

And there, big as life on each plate, is *one* fresh red raspberry!

IT DON'T mean a thing to Platemouth or Boley or me; we jest goggle at it. But these city dudes must of been looking for apple pie, or something, because they get right up on their hind laigs, sore as hell. I seen Rat-Eye snap out a blackjack, and *swup* rednose one over the head.

This ain't in order a-tall. I see Rat-Eye haul back for a real killing swipe, so I grab the old peacemaker and let go, *wham!* He's moving so fast I don't hit what I aim at, and my eyes is crossed some anyway. The shot nicks his shoulder, though, and the blow don't fall. Rat-Eye looks kinda surprised, then wilts down and slides under the table.

And jest then the ex-pugs go for me, and the table spills into my lap. Somebody throws a chair, which I dodge, and somebody else lamms my gunhand with a kick what breaks two-three bones, as I find out some later. I drop the gun, but swing that stinging fist into a face what all of a sudden comes close.

“*El-yahhhh!*” rises a rebel yell, and I know Platemouth is in action. There's two-three pugs hanging to him, but he's throwing them around regardless.

I pushed back to the open door, and then I jump and holler. Something has scorched me through my shirt! I look up, and damn if there ain't old Grover Waldo, grinning in the doorway. He's got a mighty warm stencil branding iron in his hands, and any time a Henry get too close, he sears him up, and the Henry jumps back.

Something heavy bings me under the ear, and before I go down, I kick back—wishing to hell I hadn't took off my spurs. I connect. I grab a pair of legs, and bring down somebody with a crash. Then I crawl up and smash him one—two—three!

And then the lights go out, for me, anyway. I got a bump on my noodle to prove it; though Boley claims I was snoring when the cops carried me out. Lot he knows about it!

YEAH, we woke up in yale—all three of us in one kinda small dormitory. I'm last to open an eye; and that's as is, because my left eye is doughy and sore, swole plumb shut. Two upper jaw front teeth is loose, my right hand is all puffed outa shape, some skin is gone off my chin, and all over I feel like I been walked on by a herd of ringy Brahma steers.

Also, my head is funny. I try to set up, and bump my forehead on the floor! Mebbe that Piper Heidseick fizz water wasn't so puny, after all.

In time, being used to wounds and such, I get so I can make it across the cell. Platemouth looks horrible. First off I think his face has been sliced clean off; but then I see he's bought a round steak, taken out the bone, poked his pug nose through the hole, and layed back—hoping to reduce the swellings.

It's a hell of an afternoon. And the night ain't so much better. None of us eats a damn thing, only drinking the dish-water coffee they brung us. And then we can't sleep good.

But next morning the sheriff, or whatever, takes us out, and we go up before the police sergeant. It's plumb funny, but he don't seem sore. "You're discharged, under suspended indictments," he tells us. "Here's three tickets back to Palo Verde. Don't bother us here in Denver any more, or I'll sock hell out of you!" And I'm a sailor if he don't slip us our fare on the cushions, back home!

"That ain't all, quite. One of you birds, who thought you could put it over old Grover, was Whitey Webber—snowbird an' killer. Well, we got Whitey now. They was two grand on his tail. Waldo gets it, but he says to split it up amongst the rest of you. So you ride free—and I take my half, see?"

"But old Waldo, who ain't to be sneezed at in this man's town, left a sealed envelope he says was to be given to Henry the Eighth, an' not to be opened till you get back home. Now, who in hell does he mean by Henry the Eighth?"

"I reckon that's me," groans Platemouth.

Some time later—we takes three days to go back to Orville's cow spread, aiming to let our faces and other contusions get well—Platemouth opens the letter. I see him puzzle over it, and gaze peculiar at a blue

slip which slides out, and which he picks up from the floor.

I look over his shoulder. It's a check on the Merchants' & Miners' National of Denver, for *three thousand bucks!*

An' here's the letter, done on one of them new typing machines:

*Henry VIII & Company
Gentlemen:*

Of course I knew from the first that all of you were faking; I rather expected that. After seeing the array of thugs I am accused of having sponsored, I shall search no longer for my missing son. I might find him . . .

You boys really put on an immense show, however. I appreciate it. It was probably the best battle royal ever held in Denver—and the demolition of my dining room was an infinitesimal matter. I expected it, planned it. I am glad, too, that no one was killed.

So I am turning over the reward to all of you. And as a special reward for your flight of imagination—the Gypsy chief and all—I am enclosing a slight token. Split it three ways.

Though you could not know it, I had one sure test I could have applied to any man who seemed like a son of mine. At the age of three Henry had a bad fall, and bit almost through his tongue. The tongue was stitched all the way across, and doubtless shows signs of that difficult though successful operation.

I take it most of my guests on that memorable night had tongues not stitched—but forked.

Thank you again for the best entertainment I've had since the days when I rode the Nevada and New Mexico range.

Yours,

GROVER (Dry Lake) WALDO

P. S. Doesn't a single one of you wadies ride a Waldo-Whitley saddle? I make 'em. Sort of hurt my professional pride.

G. W.

"Good Lord!" I groan, not being able yet to do anything else. "I'll bet all three of us sit his saddles; fourteen-inch fork bear trap is mine."

But I see Platemouth ain't listening. His broad, flat tongue is stuck out. And there, about a half inch from the end, is a whitish, puckered scar what runs clean across!

*An Appealing Tale of a
Knight Errant of the Road*



BINDLE STIFF

By

WILLIAM DONALD BRAY

"THERE'S another of them bums," a woman in faded calico complained. She leaned against the strong-back that supported one side of her living tent. "Wonder where they all come from?"

Her fat neighbor went on fanning herself without replying. It was too hot to talk. It was too hot to think. A California midsummer sun glared down on the brown-crisped foothills of the Coast Ranges. Below this section of the construction camp where the married men lived, a switch engine was spotting timbers and rails for the Tejon cut-off job.

"Reckon they come from the same place they're goin' to," the first speaker answered herself after a while. "And that's nowhere."

The fat one shook her head sadly and shifted her fan.

"He's goin' somewhere but he don't know it," she opined.

"Huh?"

"He's goin' to work, or get pinched for

vag. Ain't you heard? What with the hot weather, and all, they're gettin' so scarce on men that the deputies are givin' every bum they catch the chance to work for one of the contractors, or go on the county road gang."

"Then this one's goin' to work," the other replied with unction. "Because he's headin' up the new line. Funny appearin' feller, he is. All washed out and gray lookin'. Couldn't guess his age within fifteen year."

But the fat one was not to be denied her sentimentality.

"Still, he's got a mother—and maybe a wife or some sisters somewhere. Ye can't never tell."

"Huh! I bet they're proud of him. A pick and shovel stiff! He'll not be any more important on this job than a mule or a fresno. He'll go up there and come out—just a number on a pay roll!"

Her listener was vaguely stirred at the thought this aroused.

"Pitiful, ain't it?" she agreed.

DOWN along the heated stretch of road trudged Dusty Fallon. He had heard about this layout in Bakersfield. There were good jungle towns by the river, the camp cooks were generous, and every once in a while a man could slip in one of the mess halls for a regular feed.

A surprising amount of inside dope is circulated among the stiffs. He had also heard of the enmity between one of the big contractors, Clark, and one of his subbers, who was putting up some trestles at this end of the line.

But Dusty gave little thought to this. He had set chokers in the Oregon woods, followed the wheat harvest from Kansas to Canada, cut lettuce in the Imperial Valley and cantaloups in Colorado, and done all the other seasonal labor of the migratory worker. Always, he had let the boss's troubles alone. Dusty had enough of his own. And now he felt like taking the rest cure.

Suddenly he stopped. Just before him the road branched. The right-hand fork was traveled most; that followed close to the river grade and undoubtedly led to the upper camps. The other branch started climbing into the hills, as if it were heading for one of the subcontractor's camps. But that was not what had disconcerted the knight of the road.

Dusty squinted his light blue eyes. The heat waves were boiling up; the refraction distorted his vision. But over a small bridge, a hundred yards or so up the left-hand road, were rising waves that were not caused by the blazing sun. A moment more and a red tongue of flame leaped up over the bridge railing.

The onlooker nodded to himself. A cynical smile twisted the surprisingly clean-cut lines of his face. He had seen things like this before. A man on the road does.

Of course this bridge being out might hold up material on some job. But he had no call to investigate the who or why of its burning. Dusty started forward, took exactly one step, and stopped again.

Down the other road he had caught a glimpse of an approaching horseman. He was considerable distance away, but Dusty had noticed the square-rigged outline of his shoulders and a glittering badge on his left shirt pocket. Then a scrub oak hid him.

Dusty displayed an astounding amount of speed. In a flash he was off the road and racing up a brush-fringed ravine. This ran back into the steep hills that bordered the river cañon. A little further up, and he would be concealed from the passing horseman.

Like other bindle stiffs, Dusty did not seek the company of men who sported shiny bits of metal as ornaments. They asked too many personal questions. And to be found close to a burning bridge, would be nothing short of knocking on the door of the workhouse.

Hidden from the road, he stopped and listened. The hoof-beats were coming on at a gallop. He had been sighted!

Again Dusty went into action. The speed he has shown before seemed, by comparison, a mere crawling pace. Rocks and gravel beds, dry weeds and thorny scrubs, flew past him as if he had been borne on a current that was rushing upstream. Behind him, he heard a shouted call from the rider.

Dusty went on. There was the sound of steel-shod hoofs slipping over rocks. His pursuer was following up the shoulder: the going in the stream bed was too rough. Neither of the two could see the other, but the snapping of dry brush stems and rattling of pebbles advertised their locations.

Another shout, and a shot fired into the air. Dusty gave no heed.

Just ahead, a rocky ledge made an almost wall-like obstacle along the side of the cañon. Through this, the stream had carved a narrow channel, so strewn with immense boulders that a horse could not possibly make it.

This was Dusty's objective. With a final spurt, he scrambled up the last stretch of the rocky gradient. Then he reached the big rocks and wormed his way through them. He was breathing hard, but very much elated.

Due to the brush and the lead he had maintained, Dusty felt sure his pursuer had not gotten a good look at him. If he could only manage to slip away, the officer would be unable to identify him later.

Dusty figured the rider would skirt the bench, looking for a place to climb it, rather than leave his horse and follow on foot.

This was exactly what happened. The deputy started off to the south. Dusty immediately forsook the stream bed and started along the top of the ledge to the north. Here were scattering clumps of manzanita, that, added to the inequalities of the ground, made it fairly easy to keep under cover.

Dusty put a quarter of a mile between himself and the law; then was ready to slip down, wade the river at a rapids and continue going on the other side. He had put through a first-class sneak. There would be no hungry constables frisking the rattlers at tank towns, with a description of Dusty Fallon tucked in their shirt pockets.

In only one respect had the fugitive made a mistake. He had neglected to study the ground ahead as carefully as he had watched his back trail.

Dusty grinned to himself. The law, back there, was chasing around in circles by now. He straightened up, eased his cramped muscles, and breathed a long sigh of relief.

"Pretty clever, ain't you?"

DUSTY swung around and his mouth dropped open, as part of the same movement.

Leaning against a rock close by was a rather heavy man, dressed in crinkly new khaki coat and trousers. He was booted and wore a light-colored felt hat with a broad brim that was stiffly new. His face was heavy, like his body, with jowl-like effects along the cheek bones, his eyes were blue but one forgot their color in their hardness.

He was dressed like many of the boss men along the new right-of-way. But the background of lichen-spattered rocks, rising swells of the hill shoulders and the edging of blue sky back of the crest did not seem to frame him appropriately. Now he smiled with his mouth twisted to one side.

"Was there any reason or were you just runnin' for exercise?"

"I was hurryin' so as to be in time for the stew the boys was fixin'." Dusty waved his arm towards the river below them. "I'd better be movin' or all I'll get will be the smell."

He took a step downhill.

"Wait!" pleaded the stranger, with im-

mense cordiality. "I just happened to wonder if the sight of that man yonder—" he pointed to the rider who was now visible as he crossed a bare patch "—if he had anythin' to do with you bein' in a hurry."

Dusty saw the jig was up. He calculated distances and chances. His inquisitioner was considerably the larger. Also, there was the matter of a suspicious bulge of his loose coat over the right hip. It was better to be diplomatic.

"Who are you?" he parried.

"Like I told you, I'm just a curious guy. Have a cigaret." He held out the package. "Why did you burn the bridge?"

Dusty jumped back as if the paper-covered roll of tobacco had shown venomous fangs.

"What?"

"Don't think I'm tryin' to butt in on your business," the big man continued affably, "but you should have picked out a better time. That's most like bumpin' off a guy on the steps of the courthouse."

The speaker smiled again as the horseman turned in their direction.

"With the sheriff lookin' out of the window," he added.

Dusty followed his glance.

"Say, get me straight on this. I didn't do it. I was just walkin' along the road down there——"

Dusty had turned to point down the cañon slope. They were standing on the outside of the ledge; below, the yellow ribbon of road, the blackened timbers of the burned bridge, were all clearly visible. Dusty gasped.

From this point the big man had probably seen the whole thing. Then why should he be taking this attitude?

The rider was scouting back and forth along the slope, coming nearer all the time. As yet he had not sighted the two men, who were partly hidden behind some rocks.

"Be a good fellow and let me go," Dusty pleaded quickly. "If the law finds me here I'll be framed sure."

The stranger's eyes were appraising.

"You might do," he muttered. "Look like you might have amounted to something at one time."

The law caught sight of the big man's light hat and shouted an inquiry. Dusty's companion yelled back, and the law started trotting towards them.

Dusty was in a quandary. He had a hunch that the cards were stacked; all he could do was to lay low and say nothing.

He wanted to make a break for it; but something under the other's untensed manner deterred this impulse before it reached the point of action. The big fellow wasn't the law. At first the tramp had thought he might be a pillar of some old-time church who "had to do his duty as he saw it." A second glance had negated this idea. Despite the fact that Dusty's clothes were worn, and that his position in society was uncertain, he was the cleaner of the two.

"My name's Clark. Herb for short." A question died on Dusty's lips from sheer astonishment. "What's yours?"

"Er—Dusty. Dusty Fallon." The stiff was so surprised he forgot to give an alias.

"Pleased to meetcha," announced Mr. Clark, with emphasis. "It's about time we was gettin' acquainted!"

The shock of this held Dusty spellbound till the rider trotted up. He wore a deputy sheriff's badge.

Herb Clark took the initiative.

"What are you lookin' for?"

"Somebody must have set fire to a bridge on the road to Brice's camp." The deputy pointed down. "And, as I was coming down the road I saw someone slip off into the brush and chased him up the hill." His glance rested on Dusty. "Where have you been?" he challenged sharply.

Clark laughed, a big, booming sound.

"This man's all right," he assured the law. "He's been right with me all day!"

THE representative of the law, considerably disconcerted, had gone back to his business of combing the hillside.

"Thanks again," said Dusty with fervor. "Now I'd better be oozin' along."

"Wait!" Clark's gesture was peremptory. "What do you figure I saved you for?"

Dusty straightened up belligerently.

"Damned if I do your dirty work for you!"

"How do you know what I want?"

"I've dealt with your stripe before."

"Ever been in jail before?" Herb Clark turned as if to recall the deputy.

Dusty wilted.

"What's the lay?"

"Duck soup for you," Clark announced with his slow grin. "All you have to do is to get me a little confidential information."

Dusty relaxed in relief.

"That's different," he conceded. "I thought you might have somethin' different up your sleeve." Clark hid a grin. "I had a bird once proposition me to kill his brother-in-law," Dusty concluded.

Clark tapped Dusty's shoulder with a stubby forefinger.

"You go up to Brice's camp. Get a job. Keep your eyes open. I hear he's goin' to put guards on his jobs at night. Get the dope on that. Meet me Wednesday night, about sunset, at the first bend in the river below his camp. Understand?"

The bindle stiff's eyes were level.

"Yes," he answered succinctly.

Clark's florid face reddened.

"You don't have to do a thing," was his smooth assurance. "And I'll make it worth your while. I've got a foreign contract. I'll give you a soft berth in the Argentine."

AND SO Dusty Fallon got a job as carpenter's helper at Brice's No. 6 Frame Trestle. After the first hour or so he didn't mind wrestling the heavy timbers around as the carpenters lined up the bents on the ground ready to drill the bolt holes and match the ends. He had gotten interested in the conversation going on around him.

At such an isolated construction camp, the job is always the subject most talked about among the men. This one was especially interesting. Since the bridge had been burnt yesterday, everyone was on edge to figure out what could happen next.

Before the day was over, Dusty had the whole layout.

Brice had a subcontract under Clark to build three trestles. He had started on No. 6, which was now well along towards completion, in spite of all the accidents that had tied the work up. No. 6 was a hard job; Brice had planned on losing money on this and making it up on the other two. The men all thought that Clark was trying to break Brice. Then Brice would have to give up the rest of his contract; Clark would put up the other

two trestles himself and make a sockful of gold.

The men liked Brice, their boss. A clean-cut young fellow, Dusty noticed, but with lines of worry about his eyes. Brice's girl—the one he was engaged to marry—was coming up for a visit in a day or so. No wonder he wanted the job to be going nicely.

Armed guards were stationed on the trestle that night. After all the other men seemed to be snoring soundly, Dusty slipped out of his tent and started pussy-footing out towards the road. The argument between Clark and Brice was none of his business, he had decided. A fade-out was just the thing.

At the end of the line of tents he almost fell over Brice, who was sitting on a box.

Dusty mumbled something about being thirsty and the water faucet. Brice led the way back between another row of tents.

"I noticed the way you handle a peavey," the subcontractor observed. "Ever work in the woods?"

"Washington and Idaho, a little."

"Ever run across a big timber operator with the same name as yours? My girl's brother is in that line of work, although she hasn't heard from him for several years."

"A big timber operator by the name of Fallon?"

"Yes," Brice answered. "She's awfully proud of him. I'd like to meet that man."

"No," said Dusty, without interest. "Don't remember meetin' any timber men with my name."

Dusty went back to his tent and climbed into his bunk. He had suddenly realized that getting away might be a rather complicated proposition.

But his conversation with Brice had started a chain of thought that persisted as he was dropping off to sleep. Dusty had a sister, too. Just a kid as he remembered her, with hair as bronze-colored as the glistening fruit bowl that had always set on the parlor table at home. That was a long time ago. So very long that it seemed as if it were another person, and not himself, that had played on that magnolia-shaded lawn.

Strangely enough, there was a phrase, a kid saying of hers, that Dusty found him-

self trying to remember. He would almost get it; then it would fade and slip back below the threshold of consciousness. Sleepily, the bindle stiff wondered why this nearly forgotten thing out of the past was trying to intrude into his present life.

WEDNESDAY evening, about sunset, Dusty slipped down to the willow clump by the river. As yet he was not in the least interested in the fortunes of either Brice or Clark. He only hoped neither would implicate him in their troubles. But he had resolved that the information he would give Clark would be of very doubtful value.

The big contractor, however, was playing a different game tonight.

Dusty entered the clump of willows and was face to face with Clark. He was flanked by a lanky individual with big ears and a scar on his neck; and on the other side by a stocky bruiser with a badly warped nose.

"Come along!" ordered the boss, without parley.

Dusty came. They reached a more secluded spot downstream.

"Know where the guards are posted around the trestle?" Clark demanded.

"Yep. There's one on——"

"Shut up! Know the guards?"

"Yep."

Clark nodded to his companions.

"Good! Let's take a little run up the hill."

They started. Dusty realized he had been caught flatfooted. There was hardly a chance for him to escape from these three men. Hidden by the brush, they reached a point on the cañon slope overlooking the trestle site.

"Goin' to blow it up?" inquired Dusty.

"No." Clark's answer was decisive.

"We might drop a match and some of them timbers might be scorched. But there's no strong-arm stuff, see? That is, unless someone gets foxy."

"Then where do I come in?"

"All you have to do is to walk up to the guards. They'll recognize your voice in the dark. Tell them you're bringin' out some lunch or Brice sent you out to find out if things was O. K. Keep their attention for a minute. We'll attend to all the rest."

Darkness fell rapidly. Dusty was not

in the least surprised that the boss should have taken him so frankly into his confidence. To the average citizen, a hobo is a man who will commit any sort of a crime, with or without provocation, for the simple reason that he is a bum.

Below them, a few lanterns, strung out around the job, began to form pale circles of light. There was one guard on each side of the ravine across which the trestle was being built, and a third stationed a little distance down the slope where the timbers were piled.

Finally, the watchers moved into action.

Without noise, they maneuvered along the slope to a point overlooking the works. The white concrete piers stretched in a dim line across the ravine; these would furnish ideal protection.

They crept into the deep shadows flanking the base of one of these piers. The guard, trying to whistle a half-remembered ditty of wartime days, was at the other end of his beat. In a minute now, he would turn back, coming right past them. The two aides of Clark the stocky one who was called Ed, and the loose-jointed high-pockets whom Clark referred to as Joe—slipped off into the darkness. The guard turned back.

Dusty felt something disturbingly cold and round touch him suggestively between the shoulder-blades.

"Remember what I told you," Clark hissed. "No funny business!"

Clark stepped behind the pier. But Dusty knew the revolver muzzle was only a few inches from his body.

The guard came closer, still hidden in the darkness. There was only one thing for the bum to do. He was just opening his mouth to accost the guard, when two dim forms leaped out of the darkness. There was the slightest of scuffling noises; then the guard was overpowered and trussed up.

"Good work!" Clark approved. "If we can get the next one, too, without talkin', it's that much safer."

But there was an unexpected diversion.

"Hey, Mack!" a low-voiced call came from the guard on the other side of the ravine. "I just found a wallet with Brice's name in it. He must have dropped it when he was here a while ago. Say—where are you?"

Clark had worked fast. With one

movement he had leaned over the captured man and torn the gag out of his mouth. "Talk!" whispered the boss.

The helpless man made a hoarse reply but the other was too engrossed in his discovery to notice anything out of the ordinary.

"I'll leave it here by the lantern on No. 4 Pier," he called. "That way we can remember to take it in." A moment more and he was moving away on his beat.

A suppressed sigh of relief went around. The gag was replaced, the first captive securely bound. Surrounded by the other three men, Dusty felt his way across the bottom of the ravine and up the other side.

"Afraid you'll have to talk to this one," Clark confided.

Dusty grunted an assent. All he could do was to make the best of a bum job. With his help they could undoubtedly capture the other two guards; then set fire to the timbers. Some of the long posts had to be cut to order at the mills in Seattle, and could not be replaced, even on a rush order, in less than several weeks. What this setback would do to the job and to Brice's finances was too obvious to need comment. But Dusty didn't worry about other people's troubles.

The guard was well up on the hillside. The prowlers came close to the lantern on No. 4 Pier. As it was on the downhill side and hemmed in by piles of form lumber, they passed close to the light.

Clark moved over and picked up the wallet.

"Might be some letters or papers that'd be interestin' to me in here," he muttered, glancing through the flaps.

A glint of light caught Dusty's eyes. He moved closer. A small photograph, under an isinglass cover, in one of the pockets of the wallet. A dazzling sheen of bronze hair. A face, now more mature, the eyes winsome and trustful. The inscription: "*Ever yours, May.*"

"Get goin'!" Clark tossed the wallet down and shoved Dusty roughly. The tramp's feet took him on, in the wake of Ed, who was leading the way.

Dusty's thoughts were elsewhere. The subcontractor, Brice, had lost that wallet out of his pocket. Brice, who had a girl that he wanted to marry. That meant, with these young contractors, as soon as

he could afford to marry. This job would answer that question one way or the other. This job that he, Dusty—the brother of the girl—was just about to bust up.

The shock of this discovery had almost paralyzed Dusty's senses. He moved automatically. But Herb Clark, whatever his faults, had a certain animal cunning. He sensed something inimical to his plans.

Again the heavy revolver pressed close against Dusty's ribs.

They had hidden behind one of the piers; the guard's footsteps, as he came down the slope, were rapidly approaching.

"Talk to him!" Clark ordered. "Remember: be a nice boy if you want to see the sun get up!"

STRANGE to say, the present faded out of Dusty's mind for an instant. The surrounding blackness, the ghostly forms of the piers, his own dangerous predicament—all were replaced by that almost forgotten phrase that the pictured face of his sister had recalled. "Noble oblige," it was, her childish way of pronouncing some French dictum their mother had tried to teach them. "Noblesse oblige," were the real words, meaning, as Dusty translated it now, that a guy has to live up to the rep of his class.

The revolver muzzle prompted him sharply.

The guard was only a few yards away. Dusty was standing at the corner of the pier; Clark and Ed were behind him. Joe had taken a stand behind some rocks a few feet away. Dusty knew they would get him sure if he made a move. Get both the guards, too.

"Hello, there!" Dusty hardly recognized his own voice.

The guard halted suddenly.

"What the hell?" A flashlight's beam centered upon Dusty's figure. "Sure, I know you." Relief was in the tone. "Anythin' up?"

The guard came closer. Dusty could make out the attenuated figure of Joe, crouching for a spring. The cold muzzle was pressing hard into his back.

"Brice just sent me— *Look out!*"

Dusty kicked backwards with a vigor that would have put a mule to shame. The heel of his heavy shoe cracked against the big boss's shin bone.

Clark uttered an agonized yelp. Min-

gling with and drowning out this cry was the crashing report of the big revolver in his hand.

But Dusty had twisted and ducked as he kicked. His sharp elbow had circled and jarred into the big boss's arm just a fraction of a second before he pulled the trigger.

The bullet scored the side of the pier above their heads.

Clark swung out savagely with his other arm. It was a blind thrust, but it glanced off the bum's shoulder and landed with considerably diminished force on the side of his neck.

Dusty went sprawling. Sharp pieces of rock cut his hands and knees. He heard the guard fighting gamely, but both Ed and Joe had jumped on him before he had time to take advantage of the warning.

Dusty realized there would be no help from that source and that his fight with the big owner would be over before the third guard could get there.

As Dusty came to his feet on the steep slope, he scooped up a double handful of small rocks. With an underhanded swing he threw them at the dark outline of his antagonist, just as another lance of flame licked out at him.

Most of the pebbles clattered against the side of the pier, but some found their mark on Clark's face. Clark threw up his revolver, and with a vicious curse, clasped a hand to his eyes.

Bending low, like a football tackler, Dusty rushed in. Grunts from the guard and breathless orders from Joe, told that the two had gotten the best of their plucky foe. Dusty was within a yard of Clark's knees, ready to knock him off his feet.

But the contractor got his eyes open just in time. He hazily glimpsed the figure diving at him. Instinctively, he drove out with all the force of a stocky leg and a heavy boot.

The toe caught Dusty high on the right shoulder. Had it been lower, on the solar plexus, or higher, on the head, the bindle stiff would have ceased permanently to take an interest in trestles, photographs and all other mundane affairs.

As it was, the breath was jarred out of him. All his muscles were paralyzed for a moment; he turned over and over, landing

sideways on the slope, and rolled down.

Clark fired once more and missed. Dusty rolled into the pit at the base of the next lower pier. The soft dirt of the backfill cushioned his fall. Helplessly, he lay sprawled out on his back.

"**G**OT the dam' weazel!" Clark sputtered. Ed and Joe joined him. "Now let's shut that other bird's yappin' mouth."

The other guard, hearing the shots, had been calling to his companions. The three attackers started working along the side of the hill towards the timber piles.

They were in a vicious mood. This affair, which was to have been a sort of picnic, had not gone off very smoothly. It should have been all over by now, with the guards safely laid out and the timbers merrily blazing.

Instead, there was one man in their way, armed and warned. The shots that had put him on his guard had also wakened the men back at camp.

They would be swarming down here in a few minutes. But Clark knew, and Dusty did as well, that a fire started among the dry timbers could ruin them before help arrived.

Dusty raised on one elbow. His head swam. With a great effort he got to his hands and knees. Strength began to flow back into his legs. His elbows ceased their wobbling. His nerves jerked as the first shot shattered the stillness of the creeping attack on the lone guard.

Then he got to his feet, supporting himself against the side of the pier. Another shot; the guard was firing back. The bullet whistled above the trestle. Dusty knew he could slip away without danger. Clark and his partners were far too busy to worry about Dusty Fallon.

He stood unsupported, swaying a little. More shots. The guard was putting up a stiff fight. Well, he was paid to do it.

Dusty wasn't. Here was the chance he had been waiting for, to slip out. His thoughts were still blurred. What was that? He had to keep up the rep—

Dusty scrambled up the slope. He pawed around on the ground. Finally his fingers touched the stock of the rifle the overpowered guard had carried. He picked it up.

Below, the firing went on. The guard

here was out of it, unconscious and breathing faintly. Dusty advanced.

The guard was behind the shelter of the timber piles; the three attackers sandwiched between them.

Dusty waited a moment. There was an orange-red spurt of flame. Carefully, he steadied himself and fired. A cry of fright went up. Dusty shot again, making the sound his target.

Clark bellowed an order. Ed, the ratty one, squealed: "They're all around us. Let's git out of—"

"Stand! I tell you!" Clark roared. "It's nothin' but that measly bum."

In the instant's silence they all heard the hum of trucks and cars coming along the road from camp. But the road was full of chuck holes; they would be forced to drive slowly.

"Wawwho-o-o!" yelled Dusty. The spirit of battle was getting into the colorless and indifferent knight of the road. He ran forward, carrying the fight in.

Desperately, Clark led a rush on the guard. There was a flurry of firing. Joe dropped; Ed fell, and went rolling away down the slope, squawking at the top of his voice. Followed the thud of a blow; a grunt from the guard, and Dusty recognized Clark's outline against the sky as he scrambled over a pile of posts.

A flying leap and Dusty was over the breastwork after him. Clark whirled, trying to point his rifle. The flame of the shot seared Dusty's arm, but he closed in. The rifle flew out of Clark's hands as they went over backwards.

Instantly the odor of kerosene filled the air. Clark had been carrying bottles of it in his pockets. Enough had undoubtedly spilled out on the dry lumber to make starting a fire the mere lighting of a match. He would have to hold out till the men got there from camp.

The big fellow tossed him off. They scrambled to their feet and closed in. Dusty got his head down and hammered at the other's stomach.

But he didn't have the weight. He was thrown back and jarred against the timbers. Again he closed, with the same result. Dusty was weakening fast. The last few minutes of intense action had taken all his strength. Past Clark's shoulder he had a glimpse of headlights rounding a turn down the road. His

breath sobbing in his throat, he tried to hang on.

But Clark, too, realized the time was limited. He fought with a new surge of desperation, keeping Dusty away from him so that the driving, pistonlike blows of his beefy arms could take full effect.

They had milled around in the dark, stumbling and fighting blindly. A vicious jab caught Dusty squarely between the eyes, blinding him and throwing him back against another pile of timbers. He sagged, and would have fallen but for their support.

Dusty clutched at the top of the pile to hold himself up. These timbers were smaller—braces in short lengths. The top one pivoted under Dusty's hand, swinging on a high point in the center.

Clark drove forward for the finishing touch. With all his strength Dusty yanked at the brace, swung it off the pile and let it fall over him and outwards just as the big man closed in.

Things went blank in Dusty's mind for an instant. Then he became aware that Clark was on the ground at his feet, yelling frantically. The brace was pinning him down.

The cars were coming closer. This revived Dusty. He managed to stagger away.

"Help!" squalled Clark. "Help! My leg's busted!"

"If I had time, it'd be your head," Dusty consoled him, and kept on going.

Everything had panned out fine for Dusty. In a few minutes now the men would be here; he would be acclaimed as a hero. Many times on the road Dusty had dreamed of a settled place; a chance to throw in with some outfit and stay with them.

Brice would give him such a chance; Brice was the kind that would appreciate and pay for loyalty. He had a look in his eyes that meant honesty. Something like the look in May's eyes that was Dusty's chief remembrance of the sister he had not seen for so many years.

And May, his sister, would be here tomorrow. A happy reunion for May—to meet the man she was going to marry—and her brother. Her brother, Dusty, the bindle stiff!

Dusty turned away, turned his back on

the approaching cars, and slipped off silently into the darkness.

The brilliant colors of battle were fading; Dusty was becoming gray again. But at a safe distance he turned for a last look at the bobbing clusters of lights around the trestle.

"Noble oblige," said Dusty through bruised lips. "A little weddin' present, sis—although you'll never know who sent it!"

BY MIDNIGHT Dusty was on a right-of-way. By two o'clock he had made an eastbound freight. When the smoke of breakfast fires was rising lazily from many chimneys, he dropped off, chilled and stiff, at a little valley town.

The fire had burnt out of his eyes. His shoulders sagged; his feet were heavy. No longer was he the knight errant. He took up his stand by the bank corner. Men began drifting past, with sleepy eyes.

Pickings were poor. The ones that had money carried it in change purses with snaps that seemed to Dusty as massive as locks on barn doors. He wearily collected a nickel, a doubtful dime, two more nickels. This was good for a ragged hunk of beef at the butcher shop down the street.

Dusty hied himself for the open spaces. Instinct led him towards jungle town. Children were playing. They eyed him, edging off the walk. Head down, he shuffled past.

A sharp-faced woman leaned on a picket fence, throwing remarks over her shoulder to her ample neighbor. Both watched the long aisles of the tree-shaded sidewalks.

"Lookit!" whispered the fat one. "Lookit! Goin' down the other side of the street."

The angular one considered.

"I'd sure hate to think that my Jimmie would ever grow up to be as useless as that," she said, finally.

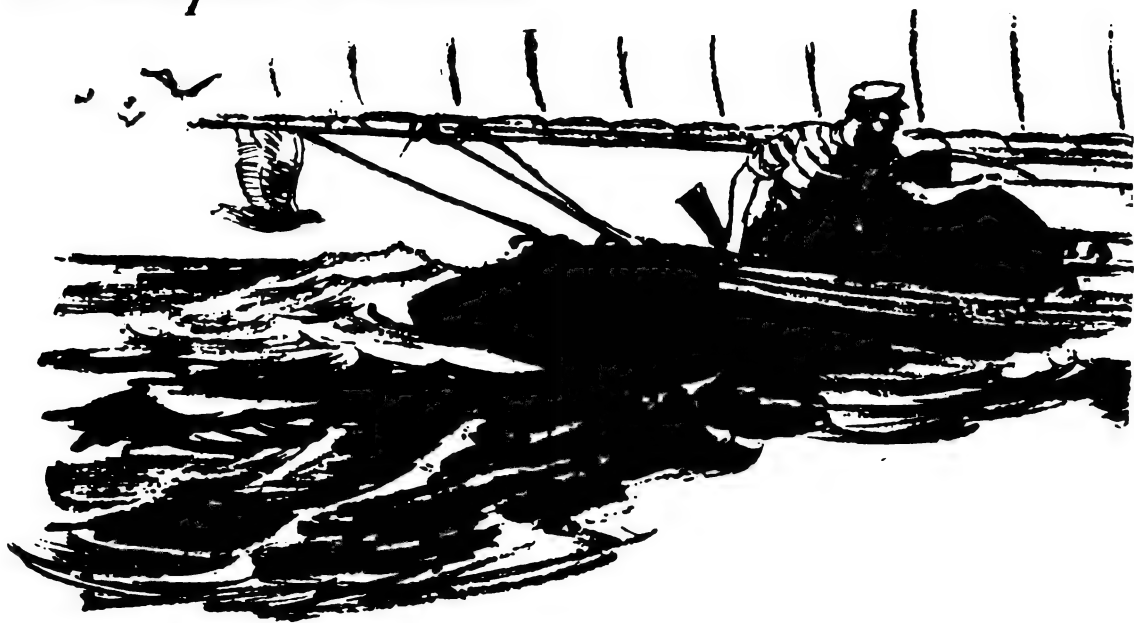
"Maybe he never had no chanct," the first speaker suggested.

"Chance or no chance, he could have done somethin'." The lean one was indignant. "At least he might have tried!"

Her fat companion felt a pleasant glow of superiority.

"Pitiful, ain't it?" she agreed.

A Complete Novelette



A Rover of the South Seas and the Pearl of Greatest Price

MARK STEELE made his name known in the Islands at the age of twenty, when he salved from the snarling reef of Pauhiki the schooner *Semper Fidelis*, a task in which others more experienced had failed. With the money that brought him, he purchased a part share in the sealer *Catherine*, and for a year or two plagued the Russians in the Sea of Okhotsk and the northern waters. A gunboat blew the *Catherine* to matchwood one dawn among the Aleutians, and later landed Steele in custody at Vladivostok. From Vladivostok he escaped without delay, leaving behind him two dead men. After that, none quite knew how, he came south to the Islands again.

His fame was established more firmly than ever when, with his naked hands, he killed Leech Cogan for drawing a gun in an argument over copra rights. Cogan had a reputation as a bad man, and there were many who thought gratefully of Steele when the news went round. For, though Steele's whims were the only law he obeyed, he dealt straight. Men knew where they stood with him.

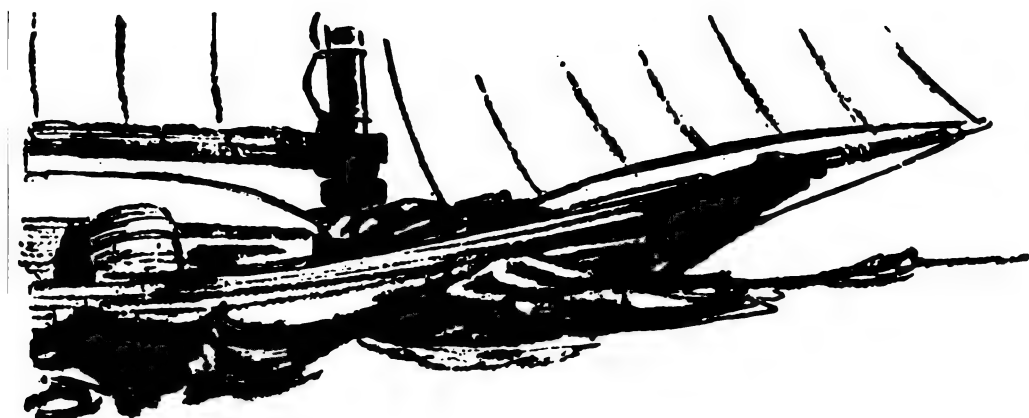
In the years that followed, he did everything from running guns in Mexico and the

Central American states to illicit pearling in the Solomons. His reputation among the natives was no less than his reputation among the whites; and it was widely known that Taku, the old chief of Rafi, in his way a great collector, had offered a fabulous reward for Steele's head. Steele had traded with Taku, and they were friendly enough.

For public opinion Steele cared little or nothing. He scoffed at the law; but not at his own conscience. He held that the riches of these smiling isles were for the man with strength enough to grasp them; and he had the strength. That the treasures of the sea could be the property of this man or of that he would not admit.

Private property was different. A pearl in the lagoon had nothing whatever in common with the pearl swinging from Tohea's ear. One was for the man who could discover and keep it; the other belonged to Tohea. That was Steele's creed, and he held to it.

He made enemies, an indisputable fact which worried him not at all. A man must be prepared to suffer that in order to succeed. Steele suffered it gladly. And he made friends. There were in the Islands men who believed that Steele exercised a



The PIRATES *of* PINDORO

By R. W. ALEXANDER

chastening influence upon rogues; and the Islands, then, harbored the rogues of the world. But the majority held that he was himself a rogue, and dealt warily with him.

So Steele went his reckless way, a laugh in his eyes and two big guns swinging from the belt about his hips. He heard of old Taku's reward for his head, and in revenge helped Taku's favorite son to elope with the daughter of a neighboring chief who happened to be Taku's deadliest enemy. A man with less subtle a sense of humor might have murdered the bridegroom and sent his head to Taku to add to his collection; but that was not Steele's way. He would have considered it crude in comparison to the joke he had played.

And then, suddenly, Steele seemed to turn his back on the wild days, seemed to settle into a rut of respectability.

It happened at Andavu, where an oyster bed had been discovered. There was a little town perched on the side of the hill, and, lower down, the mission station with its cluster of huts where the white people lived. Somehow it had never seemed reasonable to believe there might be oysters in the lagoon; and it was only when a fat Dutchman came along to prove their exis-

tence that Andavu became in any way important.

Steele was among the first to arrive at the island. It was in French waters, and permission to dive could be obtained on payment of a certain sum down and a percentage of the takings. Steele complied with the law, which he thought just enough. Besides, half a dozen soldiers had been sent specially to keep the law.

The bed was poor, and Steele had almost decided to leave when, one day near the mission station, he saw the girl. Her face was of a wistful loveliness that set him dreaming dreams, a pastime unusual with him. She was dressed all in white, and her hair was black. Her eyes glanced incuriously at him, gray as a rain-filled sky. She passed on, and Steele turned to stare. It was years since he had noticed any woman enough for that.

HE KNEW MacKellar, the missionary, and invited himself to supper at the station that night. Steele had in his time done things of which MacKellar did not wholly approve; but they were good friends for all that.

"Mac," Steele said carelessly, the meal

over, "don't you ever get lonesome here with so few whites to bid you the time of day?"

"Now and then," MacKellar confessed. "Aye, now and then, Mark."

"So few womenfolk, especially," Steele added.

"Three, besides the bairn."

The bairn was MacKellar's young daughter.

"I didn't think there were even so many as three."

"First, there's the wife," MacKellar said, counting on his fingers. "Then, there's Stromberg's missis. And thirdly, there's Storm."

"Storm?" Steele echoed.

MacKellar nodded.

"She came during a storm, you see, so Storm we called her. It was eighteen years ago, when she was maybe a few months old. There'd been a blow all night, and by morning it stiffened into a gale. About midday some boys ran down to tell me there was a boat drifting a mile or so out. Sure enough, there it was, a dingey ten or twelve feet long, tossing about like a cork. Now and then we could see an arm waving.

"Ye can't deny," MacKellar continued thoughtfully, loosening the tobacco in his pipe, "there's some Power watches over the helpless. That dingey should have lasted about two minutes in the sea running then. We could do nothing but wait, expecting all the while to see it go; but at last it was washed ashore, and we found the mother and her child. The woman was half dead with hunger and thirst, and from sitting under the sun all day; but the bairn was well and fine.

"Well, we carried them up here, and did what we could for them. The woman lived all right; but her wits were gone. She couldn't even tell us where she'd come from, or her name. We built her a hut and made sure she didn't want for anything and tried to find out a thing or two about her. It was no use. You know yourself how ships vanish in these seas. She was off one of them. And God knows what happened before she left it."

"Was there no name on the dingey?" Steele asked.

"None . . . Well, they lived in their hut without harming a soul, and the good lady here saw they didn't starve. We were a wee bit of anxious at first about leaving

the child with her; but she got better a time went on, although she never remembered what had happened or who she had been before the storm. A few years ago she died, and since then Storm's lived on by herself, though we asked her to come to us here. She's unco' handy with her needle and she makes dresses for the bairn and the missis and Stromberg's wife, and some times"—MacKellar chuckled—"she so far forgets herself as to make garments for me. And that's her story."

"A strange one," Steele said. "I'd like to meet her."

MacKellar glanced at him.

"You've no harm in your mind?" he asked bluntly.

"You should know me better than to think that, Mac. I've never harmed a woman in my life."

"Then be here tomorrow even', and I'll have her in."

STEELE, the following day, found himself curiously impatient for the hours to pass. He laughed at himself for it; but the impatience persisted. And, before going ashore, he gave some thought to his appearance. It was his habit never to go unarmed; but this evening he contented himself with shoving a small revolver into his hip pocket. He was surprised at his own boyish eagerness as he strode up through the scented darkness towards the mission station.

The girl had already come when he arrived. She recognized him, he knew though there was no more than a flicker of the gray eyes to tell him so.

"Storm," MacKellar said, "this is Mark Steele, a very good friend of mine."

Gravely, she gave Steele her hand.

"I have heard of you."

Steele suddenly felt uncomfortable. Perhaps it was that he was hypersensitive; but something in her tone seemed to hint that she had heard little good of him.

"It was you who salved the *Semper Fidelis*?" she added.

Steele nodded, relieved.

"Yes; but that was a long time ago."

She smiled, and Steele thought her lovelier than ever.

"Six years only. I was twelve then; but I remember my mother telling me of it, and Mr. MacKellar saying how wonderful it was."

"You have a good memory," Steele said awkwardly. He was wondering if she remembered with equal lucidity other things of which he had less reason to be proud.

She was there an hour or more, and all the time Steele watched her without appearing to watch her at all. She had about her slightest movement a gentle grace that charmed him greatly, and a ready laugh wonderfully soft. He watched her playing with MacKellar's child, and was conscious of queer, wistful thoughts, foreign and disturbing.

He saw her again a few days later, and spoke with her a moment. But she seemed unconscious of his desire for her to linger, and almost immediately passed on. Shrugging, he reflected that probably his reputation had much to do with her reluctance to stop. For the first time he regretted the years that lay behind. He was not ashamed of them; but he realized that to the casual eye they must appear as worse than wasted. He had treated with contempt every law but the law of his conscience. He had killed and he had stolen; but he had killed only men who would have killed him, had they had the power, and he had stolen only from the sea and the islands, which he held to belong to no one man. He had dealt straight with those who had dealt straight with him. He had harmed no woman. Of these two truths he could boast; but, looking into Storm's gray eyes, he wished for more than these.

They seemed to meet more often as the days passed, and the girl grew friendly. Steele sometimes thought she looked forward with pleasure to their meetings. They met so often that MacKellar, with that bluntness which he used always with Steele, remarked upon it.

"You're seeing Storm often, Mark."

"Not so often as I'd like to see her," Steele confessed.

"What are you looking for from the lassie?"

A hot flame leaped behind Steele's eyes—leaped, and was gone. MacKellar had said only what he himself would have said in the same place.

"I'll tell you," he said. "You wouldn't think me a coward, would you, Mac? Yet I am, in this at least. But some of these days I'll pluck up courage to ask her to marry me."

"Good!" MacKellar said sincerely.

"And then you'll drop the foolish wandering, Mark?"

Steele nodded.

"If she takes me, yes. Otherwise, no. It's got a grip of me, Mac, a grip it'll take her fingers to break loose. But here I stay until she gives me her answer."

And there he stayed until the schooner *Goshawk* came from the east, though even then he had not asked Storm to marry him.

II

THE schooner *Goshawk* came from the east one fine morning when the trade blew steady and strong. She came with a bone in her teeth, gray from the water to her topsail spars. She carried a dangerous quantity of sail for so fresh a wind, Steele thought, watching her with interest. He had an eye for beautiful vessels, and the *Goshawk* was a beautiful vessel. Strange, he thought, that he had never seen her before this. Of that he was convinced; for he never forgot a ship he had once seen.

The *Goshawk* swept through the wide gap in the reef, came about in a great half circle, lost way, and lay to in the shelter of the island. The rattle of her anchor chain came musically across the blue lagoon. A boat put off from her side, three men in it, and made for the beach. Another, rowed by two men, headed for Steele's lugger. Two more made for the luggers that lay nearest the *Goshawk*. The area of the oyster bed was dotted with a dozen or more of the pearlers' crafts.

Steele, watching those four boats creep across the lagoon, was conscious of a slight quickening of his pulses. There was in this something he did not understand. He went below, came on deck again with the two guns low against his thighs.

The boat headed for him was close now. He leaned idly against the rails, arms folded, body slack. A stranger would have thought him carelessly at ease, unprepared; but that was far from being the case. Every muscle in his body was ready for swift and instant action. His Panama, pulled low to shade his eyes, threw a black line of shadow across his firm chin.

The boat came closer, closer; the men rested on their oars. It bumped gently against the side of the lugger, and one of the men, leaning over, made it fast with a

length of rope in the bow. Then, without awaiting an invitation, they clambered on deck. Steele turned a little to face them. Almost for the first time they looked at him.

"Hell!" one said. "If it ain't Steele!"

He advanced a few steps, but Steele's cold eyes halted him.

"It's a long time since I seen you, Mark," he finished weakly. Under his tan he had changed color; his face was a sickly gray.

"Yes," Steele said, without obvious regret.

He had not seemed to move, yet he had somehow stepped clear of the rails, and his arms were no longer folded. Instead, his hands rested lightly on his hips. There was danger here; he knew it without reasoning. His quick ears had caught dismay, and not astonishment, in that first ejaculation. He knew this man for a scoundrel to be bought when dirty work was to be done.

"More'n a year," said the man, a suspicion of unsteadiness in his voice. He had noticed and interpreted Steele's change of attitude.

"Yes," said Steele again. "More than a year, Sam." His glance went idly to the revolver in Sam's belt. "Go heeled still, Sam, I see."

"Have to, these days," Sam laughed. "Can't tell what you'll meet up with in the Islands."

"No," Steele agreed. "That's why I carry them myself." There was no significance in his tone, only a lazy good humor; yet the man he addressed shivered.

"Nice little boat you got here," the second man said, strolling forward, thumbs carelessly hooked in his belt. He, too, carried a gun.

"Tolerable, tolerable," Steele nodded, turning to watch him.

The man halted.

"Just paying a call?" Steele said incuriously.

"That's it," Sam said. "Just payin' a call."

"Thought maybe you might be here on business."

"Business?" Sam echoed. "What business, Mark?"

Steele jerked his head towards the other boats.

"The same as your friends are on. But maybe they're just paying calls, too. Come on down and have a drink."

He was playing with fire and he knew it; but the knowledge deterred him not at all. He had infinite confidence in himself. That either of these men would kill him if his back was turned for an instant he clearly realized; and, as he saw it, the obvious thing for him to do was to refrain from turning his back.

He brought this theory into practice immediately, following them into the cabin, though the second man politely stood aside until Steele as politely waved him on. Even as he found the drinks he faced them, and they made no move. They were careful, too, to keep their hands above the table. But only when Steele, jokingly, had warned them.

"Once," Steele said, "I nearly lost a leg because I wasn't particular about my friends keeping their hands over the table. That was a lesson to me. Now I *am* particular."

He poured them each a stiff drink and a lighter one for himself.

"Here's how!"

His eyes mocked them over the rim of the glass. Next instant he flung the tumbler aside, leaped back from the table like a cat, both guns out. From the island came the sound of shots.

Swift as his action had been, the two men facing him had moved almost as swiftly. The man called Sam sprang back and to one side, pulling his gun with a desperate effort at speed. Steele shot him. Two .45 bullets through his chest, he slid to the floor.

The second man, more cunning, had dropped to his knees in the shelter of the table. Steele vaulted across it, landed on him with both feet. He screamed as one leg doubled under him and snapped like a carrot. Steele, merciless, swung him from the floor, threw him on the bunk, wrenched the gun from his hand. Treachery always waked to life the latent ferocity in his nature.

IT WAS over. Ten seconds would have covered it all, from the instant the sound of shots came to the little cabin, to the beaten man's relaxing on the bunk. Steele dropped the smoking guns back into their holsters, straightened up. The man on the bunk had fainted. Well, he could wait. Meanwhile, the firing on the island had ceased. That might mean anything.

Steele took the few steps of the companionway at a jump, gained the deck.

The soldiers sent to guard the oyster bed had built themselves a little hut on the edge of the palms, where they gossiped and played cards all day, and slept at night. Here, too, the pearls handed over to them were kept.

About this, now, three of them lay strangely still, motionless in the white glare of the sun. It was obvious that they had been taken by surprise. A little further down the beach a fourth sprawled, his rifle beside him. He, Steele thought, had come down to meet the boat, which was drawn up a few feet from his body. The fifth, dead also, lay where the path from the village met the beach.

The sixth, the officer, still lived. Steele, hawk-eyed, picked him out immediately as he leaned against a palm, rifle to shoulder. He seemed uncertain as to the direction in which danger lay, for he glanced from side to side, and sometimes behind him. Yet death came to him from a point of which he had never dreamed. From the deck of the *Goshawk* a rifle cracked, and the officer, very quietly, slid to the ground.

That awakened Steele to a realization of his own danger. The schooner was no more than two hundred yards distant, and he well knew how deadly shooting at that range could be. A bullet tore splinters from the port rail as he leaped for the shelter of the companionway; another chiseled a long groove in the deck almost at his feet. Then, he was below.

The man on the bunk had not moved; to all appearances he was still unconscious. But Steele, lifting down the rifle from the rack above the bunk, kept one hand lightly on the quiet face. He was up against something new in his experience, and he meant to take no chances.

That was as well, for as he turned away the man with the broken leg opened his eyes and stirred slightly, pulling the knife from his belt. Steele whirled, dashed it from his fingers with the barrel of the rifle. The man swore and lay still, glaring up at him.

"I'd like to know what's behind all this," Steele said, assuring himself the magazine was full, slipping spare clips of cartridges into his pockets. "Six soldiers aren't murdered every day of the week, even here. What's the game?"

"I guess you'd better find out," was the reply. "I don't squeal."

"You'll squeal like a rat when I have time to attend to you," Steele said savagely.

The man shrugged. "Maybe you might as well know; for all the good it'll do you. Me an' Sam was to hold you up an' take any pearls you had. If you gave in peaceable, all right; if not, we was to shoot. The same's bein' done to every lugger here. We didn't know you was Mark Steele, or we'd ha' left you alone."

"And the soldiers?"

"We was to take any pearls they had, too. Leastways, so far as I know. An' keep them quiet. Our job was to go through the luggers."

Steele grunted. This was nothing short of piracy.

"Who's behind you?"

The man's face set obstinately.

"You don't learn that from me, Steele."

Steele laughed, a laugh grim and unpleasant.

"We'll see about that when the show's over."

"Well," said the man sullenly, "his name's Lemaire."

"Lemaire? I don't know him. Is that the truth?"

The man nodded.

"He'll kill you before all's finished, so it don't matter what I tell you."

Steele gathered the two guns from the floor. "If you move from that bunk I'll blow the heart out of you."

"I'm not movin' none," said the man, groaning.

Steele crept up the companionway, dodged into the shelter of the deckhouse. His two Tongan divers had long since made at their best speed for the beach, swimming most of the way under water. But for the man below, he was alone.

The deckhouse between himself and the *Goshawk*, Steele glanced about the lagoon. The two boats had worked rapidly; but even so several of the luggers had escaped and were now headed for the other end of the island, where a second break in the reef lent them access to the open sea.

Of those that remained, none had moved. Steele guessed their skippers had been told that to move was to invite fire from the schooner.

As he clearly saw, so far as the luggers

were concerned the raid had been carried out bloodlessly enough. Mostly they were owned by Dutchmen, who now stood apathetically on deck, not an ounce of fight between them all. Steele felt contempt surge through him. He swung the rifle to his shoulder, balanced across the sights the figure of one of the men in the boats. His finger was tightening on the trigger when he hesitated. To kill in cold blood had never been his way. The lives of these men lay in the strength of his trigger-finger. His shooting could not be prevented; they were absolutely at his mercy.

"Hell, no!" Steele said, and lowered the rifle.

He watched the boats hurry back from the luggers to the schooner, watched them swung on deck. The three men who had landed had not yet put in an appearance. Steele, crouched there beside the deckhouse, watched the fringe of the palms as a hawk watches the clump of grass in which a mouse has stirred. The soldiers had been killed, the storehouse, presumably, rifled; he could not understand what kept the three men still ashore.

STILL he watched, while the long minutes drifted by. There were men on the deck of the schooner; Steele caught the flash of a glass. They were watching him, then. He chuckled. Watching him, and wondering why Sam and his companion had not returned.

The three men came into view along the village path. Steele tensed, almost shouted. The blood fled from his face, leaving him strangely pale.

The men came along slowly. They would have hurried, but that between two of them struggled a slender figure in white. Storm!

Steele drew in a great breath, leaned against the deckhouse. His hands were shaking, though they had been steady as rock that cold dawning the *Catherine* was blown to matchwood and his crew killed like rats. With a great effort of will he held them before him until they ceased their trembling. He lifted the rifle. The figure of the man who walked aloof from Storm blurred the front sight, balanced in the nick of the rear. Steele pressed the trigger gently. He must make no mistake. The man, instantly dead, fell backward and lay with his face to the sun.

It seemed to Steele, as the echoes of the shot died away, that a great silence descended on the island and the lagoon. The schooner was silent, and the clustering luggers. The watching Dutchmen stood motionless as statues—probably, Steele reflected grimly, afraid to stir. Storm and her captors had halted, staring, the two men crowded close beside the girl. Steele jerked another cartridge into the breech, but did not fire. The danger of hitting that slim figure in white was too great. He could not be sure that she would stand still.

The rattle of the schooner's anchor chain broke the startled hush. The *Goshawk* came to life, heeled over, gathered way. She had not covered fifty yards when Steele knew her mission. Two men in her bows were firing at the lugger; white chips started up from the rails and the walls of the deckhouse. On the beach, the girl was struggling wildly, shouting. Her voice was lost, broken by the voice of the rifles.

Steele, cornered, crouched lower. He could do nothing but wait. To leave the shelter of the deckhouse was to be shot. Besides, there was no other shelter to be gained. He had an instant's compassion for the man below, and shouted to him to scramble on deck. But there was no reply.

The firing had ceased. He heard, now, the snarl of the schooner's cutwater, the creak of her rigging. He realized suddenly that every muscle in his body was taut, his teeth clenched. And he grinned, mirthlessly.

Then the shock came. Steele had been prepared for it, but it lifted him from his feet, hurled him across the deck. The lugger heeled over; the blue water piled up almost level with her rails. To Steele, rolling in the scuppers, the towering mass of the schooner seemed to shut out the sky and the sun. A man peered down at him from the bow, laughing. So for an instant everything stood still before the lugger broke.

Steele, in the water, felt the shoulder of the *Goshawk* brush him lightly aside as she resumed her interrupted pace. Remembering that peering face, and the rifle barrel beside it, he went deep, and stayed under while his breath lasted. When he came up, a bullet splashed spray into his eyes. He went down again, and when next he

reached the surface the schooner was far away, swinging about in a great curve. The wreckage of the lugger floated all around him. Of the dead man and the man with the broken leg he saw nothing.

Again he dived, and came up cautiously beside what remained of the lugger's mast. The sail, torn loose, ballooning on the water, hid him perfectly. He thrust his knife through it, to enable himself to see what was happening.

And there he floated while the *Goshawk* surged past within a score of yards, her rails lined with men, to turn and lose way opposite the two men and the girl. The men had launched the boat, and rowed strongly out. The girl sat huddled in the stern. Steele saw her brought aboard, saw the schooner dance through the gap in the reef. Then, and only then, he pushed off from the mast and swam ashore.

Through the fragrant bush he ran to the missionary's house. MacKellar came out to meet him, a shotgun in his hands.

"They've taken Storm, Mac, and you let them get away with her!" Steele's voice broke strangely, and he swore to hide the break.

The Scotchman stiffened.

"I had my own to look to, man, and no thought they were after Storm."

He stared at the schooner, already several miles distant from the island, headed east. His tone softened.

"What'll ye do, Mark, lad?"

Steele laughed harshly.

"What'll I do? I'll hunt them from one end of the Pacific to the other, and kill them one by one." He raised a clenched fist to the hot sky. "I'll get her back, if it takes the rest of my life to do it! And if they've harmed her, by God they'll pay for it!"

III

STEELE did not hurry. There was nothing that he could hurry. He reasoned things out with a cold logic more menacing than any bluster. If he was to do anything, he must have money. Such as he had possessed was now at the bottom of the lagoon, forever lost amidst the branching coral. He forgot that. The pressing necessity was to make more.

It was then that Steele thought of selling his head to Taku, chief of Rafi.

To Stromberg he disposed of some copra rights he held in Viti Levu, and with the money these brought him hired a sloop from an old friend. With three native boys and an old shellback he sailed her to Sydney, where he paid a visit to a Chinese of his acquaintance. Steele had many queer acquaintances.

"Li Sin," he said, sitting crosslegged in the little room behind the shop, sipping green tea, "I want the head of a man."

Li Sin nodded gravely.

"Who is he, this man?"

Not a muscle of Steele's face moved.

"You mistake me, Li Sin. In the Solomons there is a chief named Taku, who has offered a reward for my head, so many sharks' teeth, so many sticks of tobacco, so many maidens, and other things. These are no good to me; but I guess he could be persuaded to change them for something of more practical value."

"Such as pearls," said the grave Celestial. Steele nodded.

"Such as pearls. But, Li Sin, I have no desire to part with my head. So I thought that if I came to you, who know so many strange men of so many strange professions, you might perhaps be able to get me a head that would readily pass as mine after mine had been smoked."

"Can do," Li Sin said. "Come to-morrow."

Steele, the following day, made the acquaintance of a countryman of Li Sin's, one Pei Yut. Pei Yut was an old man, bowed like a monkey with years. Pei Yut, Li Sin told Steele, could make a copy of his head that would deceive an expert. With the skin of a goat, and other things including the eyes of a certain fish, a real skull, and real hair . . . Steele, listening to the details, was a little revolted. But they sounded convincing, and he suffered Pei Yut to make a cast of his face in clay.

"In a week it will be finished," Li Sin said, for Pei Yut could speak no English. He mentioned a sum.

"Double that if it's satisfactory," Steele said. Taku would be a hard man to deceive where a head was concerned.

The head was satisfactory, more satisfactory than he could have dreamed. In the dim light of the inner room it seemed almost as if his own lay there grinning evilly, shrunken a little, shriveled by the smoke of the preserving fire, the eyes dull

and withered. It had human teeth, and as genuine a skull. But then, human heads were easily enough come by. A double thickness of sacking tied about the neck prevented his seeing what it consisted of inside. Perhaps, he reflected grimly, that was just as well.

Steele then sailed for Rafi. He knew well his quest might lead to nothing but death for his companions and himself; but the knowledge deterred him not an instant. He had yet to find the game to which a little risk did not add a thrill.

They reached Rafi one blazing afternoon, and Steele boldly dropped anchor opposite the bush where Taku's village lay. For any sign of life visible, the island might have been deserted. But Steele knew they were under observation from the bush. He knew, too, that curiosity would soon bring the savages into the open. So he waited with infinite patience while the long hours drifted by.

A figure stepped from the dappled twilight of the bush into the glare of the sun. It was a young savage, naked and unashamed, a Snider in one hand, a great crimson flower behind each ear. With an exaggerated carelessness he swaggered down towards the blue water. Others followed, until a dozen or more stood silent upon the beach, watching the sloop. Steele went on deck, beckoned them. He wore a great false beard, black and curly, which disguised him beyond all chance of recognition.

In answer to his signal some of the savages vanished, to reappear a few moments later, dragging a light canoe. This they launched, and headed for the sloop.

"Keep your weather eye lifted now, Dave," Steele warned the old sailor. "These boys aren't to be trusted any more than a bagful of scorpions. They mustn't come on board. If you see them trying to, shoot first and ask about their intentions afterwards."

"Guess so, boss."

The canoe came alongside, halted with a churning of paddles. One of the savages made as if to climb on deck, but sank back at Steele's imperious gesture.

"You fella belong Taku?" Steele demanded.

They nodded.

Steele gave his message quickly, clearly. The head for which Taku had offered the

reward was here. Taku was to be told at once. More, he must come to the ship for it.

The canoe returned ashore, and Steele waited, his eyes on the bush. The treachery of these Solomon Islanders was an open book to him. They would smile and point, and hatchet you when you turned to see at what they pointed. Steele had seen it done, and thought it typical of them.

TAKU, an old, withered man, came to the beach. The one passion that remained to him was the collecting of heads. Already he possessed the finest collection in the Islands, and his ambition was to add to it Steele's. Steele's was a valuable head, because Steele was a notable man. Besides, he was Taku's enemy.

Taku had heads older than himself, heads that had been old when his father was born. He had the head of a Chinese woman, and the head of an African negro. The heads of several white men were in his collection, and the head of one white woman. Taku often wondered if the white child whose head he treasured had been the daughter of that woman. Luckily for themselves, they had both been dead when they reached him. That was long ago, in his youth. He had other heads, too, heads with histories to enhance their value in his eyes. But before any of these he wanted the head of Mark Steele.

Taku came to the beach, and sent his son to see the head. Steele unwrapped it from its coconut matting, showed it, holding it up by the shriveled hair. But he would allow the son neither to handle it nor to come aboard. Young men have sharp eyes. Taku himself must come.

Taku, driven past caution by his great desire, came. But he hesitated before trusting himself alone on board the sloop, hesitated until Steele dangled the head before his eyes. Then, with many a grunt of exertion, he clambered on deck, and to prove his courage took snuff in astonishing quantities. Steele silently laughed at him.

Steele brought Taku down to the cabin and gave him gin. The old villain drank it neat, though it brought tears to his eyes. Then Steele showed him the head. Taku nodded gravely. It was the head he desired. And it had been smoked well. How had the man died? Steele related a tale of bloodshed and horror that reflected little

credit on himself, but pleased the old savage. A man's doings in life, and the manner of his death, meant much where the value of his head was concerned.

Steele asked about the reward. Taku went over it item by item, so many sticks of tobacco, so many sharks' teeth, so many young maidens, so many pigs, so many hatchets . . . Steele interrupted the recital. These things were of no value to him. Taku must offer something better. Taku could think of nothing better, but was ready to fall in with any ideas the white man had. Steele mentioned pearls.

Taku looked sullen. He had no pearls.

Steele knew better than to believe him. Not a chief in the Solomons but had his little store of pearls hidden away against the coming of a venturesome trader. In that case, Steele said, the head must be sold elsewhere. It was a pity, for so fine a head should become part of a fine collection, and not be wasted on some little chief with nothing but the heads of a few slaves.

Taku became alarmed. If the white man could wait, he would send messages out among his friends to discover if they had any pearls. Steele pretended reluctance. How long must he wait? Until tomorrow, Taku said; no longer.

With a great show of hesitation, Steele consented. He would wait until noon tomorrow, but not an instant more.

Taku went ashore to unearth his pearls, bringing with him a bottle of rum. Steele had seen him furtively pick the bottle from the shelf and tuck it into his loincloth; but had said nothing. He had left the bottle on the shelf for no other purpose. The fiery drink would tend to make the old chief generous, while at the same time undermining his judgment.

Steele, before darkness fell, brought the sloop well clear of the island. That was the only way to ensure safety. With the sloop close inshore, and the head Taku coveted so much aboard the sloop, anything might happen. And Steele was not yet ready for things to begin happening, and would not be ready until such pearls as Taku brought were in his hands.

Mid-morning saw Taku aboard again. There were canoes hovering around the sloop, and Steele smelt treachery. He had a keen nose for it. Taku might well have decided overnight to pay for the head with

hatchets instead of pearls. But Steele shortly directed him to warn the canoes off. Taku saw how the big man's hand had dropped carelessly to the gun in his belt, and obeyed.

Down in the cabin, Taku unrolled a wisp of cloth he had carried tucked between *lava-lava* and skin. Steele watched him with supreme carelessness. The cloth unfolded, to reveal half a dozen pearls, small and of inferior quality. Steele gestured his contempt. He would not even consider them. The old chief looked disappointed, and argued at length. Steele gave him gin and put the head on the table between them.

Taku, hesitatingly, produced a second scrap of rag from his loincloth. This held three pearls. Steele simulated indifference; but despite himself his breath quickened. These were such pearls as he had dreamed of in his younger days, when every oyster held for him the probability of a fortune. They were flawless, spherical, alive with a fire of palest rose. One by one he took them between finger and thumb, examined them, grunting noncommittally. Taku watched his every movement with eyes black as jet. Steele pushed the pearls back to him, shaking his head. They were not good enough, he said. Did Taku know the value of the head?

Taku knew the value of the head; but he had some idea, too, as to the value of the pearls. And he had no more pearls. He repeated this so often, and exhibited such genuine dismay when Steele picked up the head, that Steele believed him. Would all the pearls not buy the head? Steele hesitated, wavered, gave in. The nine pearls would buy the head. He slipped them into his pocket, made Taku a present of a bottle of gin, watched him wrap the head reverently in its coconut matting, and followed him on deck.

The sloop was moving slowly, dragging the chief's canoe. The other canoes were close inshore. Steele measured the distance, found it enough. He helped the old chief down, then nodded to the sailor and the Kanakas. The mainsail was run up. Steele with a flourish took off his beard as the sloop gathered way.

Taku's yell of amazement and anger was answered by others from the canoes inshore. Paddles dipped frantically; but the sloop was now well under way, and moving

rapidly. For almost the first time since he had lost Storm, Steele laughed with genuine amusement. He still laughed softly to himself when Rafi was no more than a cloud on the horizon.

HE SOLD the pearls for a reasonable sum in Sydney, and bought the sloop. With a vessel of his own and money in his pocket, he breathed more freely. He was his own master. All that remained now was to find Lemaire—and, with Lemaire, Storm.

He went through the dives of Sydney. He drank with blackguards and thieves and worse, and called them his friends. And into their ears he whispered the word that Mark Steele wanted Lemaire, or any man who could say where Lemaire lay hidden. They shook their heads, eyeing him suspiciously. Lemaire was a name unknown to them. But if ever they met him they would deliver the message.

In Sydney he whispered it, and again in Suva. He went east to the Low Islands, and north as far as Hawaii, and the word followed him, and spread like ripples on a pond. Mark Steele sought Lemaire, or any man who knew where Lemaire lay hidden. And he was ready to pay.

It found him new enemies; he had proof of that on more than one occasion. First a message came to him to the effect that Lemaire lived in a certain house in Mindoro. Steele went alone to the house, and in his eagerness lost caution. An old hag opened the door to him. Yes, Lemaire was in; would the gentleman step inside? Steele stepped inside, and a knife took him smoothly in the left shoulder. Only the darkness saved his life. He was sorry, afterwards, that in the anger of the moment he dashed out the life of the Malay who had ambushed him. The man might have known something. When he searched the house, it was deserted. Even the old woman was gone.

Lemaire, then, was on the alert. A knife was thrown at Steele as he strode through a silent street in Macassar; and when he whipped about, gun in hand, the street was still deserted. This happened a second and a third time, in Halmahera and Port Moresby; and Steele went warily. To the present he had been lucky; but some day a knife might strike home and end for ever his quest. The possibility was far from re-

mote. He had always walked in the middle of the street; but now he began at odd moments to glance behind, and sometimes to halt and listen; and always he took care in rounding dark corners.

In saloons, too, he sat with his back to the wall, facing the room and the door. Even so there was danger; for one night a quarrel started among some men at a near-by table, and shots were fired. Neither of the men was wounded; but the bullets came so close to Steele that one of them ripped his shirt. He rose slowly, walked across the room to where the two men were being cajoled by their friends.

"Any more wild shooting, boys, and I take it up," he said grimly. He tapped the guns swinging low in their holsters. "Tell Lemaire to come and stage his own gun play."

"Who in hell's Lemaire?" one of the men blustered. But his glance fell before Steele's cold regard. "You take things up too darn sudden, Steele."

"Maybe, maybe," Steele nodded, strolling away. He was convinced the men had meant to kill him.

Lemaire was in hiding; but, despite that, he was sometimes active. The pearlers at Nepa were raided, and two men killed. From the description of the schooner, Steele knew it had been the *Goshawk*. Again, a schooner came down on the beds at Lapu Nit, and vanished with the hard-won proceeds of three months. Yes, Lemaire was active enough. He worked, Steele decided, from a base somewhere in the maze of islands, a base the secret of which was known only to himself and his crew.

THE raid at Andavu was a year past before Steele had further word of Lemaire. The sloop lay at anchor in Papeete harbor. It was a breathless night hot and still, with the water like a sheet of glass. Steele, leaning idly over the rails heard the rhythmic dip of a paddle, saw a canoe glide from the darkness and range alongside. A white boy, naked as the day he was born, peered up at him.

"You Mr. Steele?"

"That's me," Steele said lazily. He supposed the boy had come to ask some favor, as boys frequently did.

"Mr. Mark Steele?" said the boy.

Steele became intent.

"Yes." Then: "What do you want?"
The boy came lithely to his feet, held out a scrap of paper.

"That's for you, then."

"Hang on a minute," Steele said quickly.

He hurried below, read the note. If Mark Steele wished to know the whereabouts of Paul Lemaire, and was ready to pay for the information, let him follow the boy who brought this. The note, scrawled in pencil, was unsigned.

Steele hesitated not an instant. He was already armed; all that remained was to assure himself that his guns were fully loaded and ready for action. This done, he went on deck, to find the boy waiting.

"I'll bring you in," said the boy.

"Thanks," Steele said, drily. "But I think I'll take the dingey."

He rowed ashore, following the slight wake of the canoe. Leaving the two craft side by side, the boy led him along the beach some little distance, then struck upward to the shore road. Along this they went in silence, the boy padding softly in the dust, Steele walking lightly for all his bulk. It was very dark, and he felt safe enough. Then the shape of a bungalow loomed in front, and the boy halted. Steele swung himself still deeper into the shadows.

"Is this the place?"

"Yes."

"Who's in there?"

"Only my uncle."

"Who is he?"

"He told me not to tell."

"Huh!"

Steele considered it. It seemed suspicious, yet the boy was frank enough.

"Where's the door?"

The boy pointed.

"Right there."

"Good. Now you run back and keep an eye on the dingey until I come along."

The boy vanished, and Steele, guns out, skirted the hut silently as a prowling leopard. It lay in silence, and in darkness but for the faint glow of a lamp from one room at the back. Crouched in the undergrowth, he waited half an hour or more; but the hut still lay in silence. If this was a trap, it was one into which any man might fall.

At length Steele moved. He slipped to the lighted window, pushed the grass mat aside a fraction of an inch at a time. A

yellow spear stabbed the darkness, and Steele peered into the room.

At the table a man sat waiting. He was a small man, with a reddish beard. His fingers drummed unceasingly on the rough-hewn wood; he was nervous. Now and then he raised the tattered sleeve of his shirt to wipe the sweat from his brow. When a man laughed in the road outside, he stiffened; nor did he relax until once more the night was silent.

Steele could see no weapon, either on the man or on the littered table. He brushed aside the grass screen, thrust one gun into the room. The man at the table started in terror; his face went gray.

"Don't move!" Steele whispered. "And if you make a sound it'll be your last."

He wrenched at the mat, and it fell to the floor.

"Are you alone?"

The man nodded, dumbly.

"You're sure?" Steele insisted. "If there's any double-crossing here, you go first. Don't forget it."

"I know," said the man unsteadily. "I'm alone."

But Steele was taking no chances.

"Stand up. Walk over there. Now turn your back. That's the ticket. Don't move."

Steele wriggled through the window with the agility of a boy, then moved clear of it, into a corner of the room.

"That's all right."

The man turned slowly.

"You don't take any risks, Steele."

"You know me, eh?" said Steele. "No, I take no risks where Lemaire is concerned."

"You're right," said the other, fawningly.

"Keep your hands in sight!" Steele snapped. "I'm not sure of you yet. Now, you have some information for sale?"

The man nodded. "I can tell you where Lemaire is now."

"You can, eh? And where's that?"

"What about the money?"

Steele tapped his pocket.

"The money's here. And here it stays until you've told me what I want to know. You'll have to trust me, because I don't trust you."

"I don't like this," said the man sullenly.

"Like it or not, where's Lemaire?" Steele's tone was cold as death.

"On Pindoro, in the Arafura Sea."

Steele snarled menacingly.

"Pindoro? Pindoro's nothing but a mangrove swamp!"

"I know," said the man quickly. "But there's firm land in the middle, and a channel through the swamp to it. Lemaire brings the schooner up when he's lying low to alter her."

"He alters her?" Steele said.

"Yes. After every raid. Paints her a different color, and changes her rigging a bit."

"Hmm! How many men has he?"

"About twenty, as a rule. Sometimes more."

"Where does this channel lie?"

"North."

Steele nodded slowly.

"How do you know all this?"

"I was with him once." The man's eyes shifted furtively. "That was before he turned pirate."

"Huh!" Steele grunted. "We'll let that be; it doesn't matter a hoot to me if you turned pirate a dozen times over. But if I find you've been lying . . ." He tapped the guns in his belt. "I'm not a safe man to monkey with, though I say it myself. Here's your money." He counted out a sum. "Does that satisfy you?"

The man hesitated.

"I'm takin' a big risk."

"So did Judas," Steele said, adding to the pile. "Now you'll walk in front of me as far as the door."

He left the bungalow without incident, walked along the road and back to the dingey. There the boy awaited his arrival. Steele slipped a coin into his hand.

"You live with him?"

The boy nodded, gravely.

"I've nobody else."

"I'd look about for someone, if I were you. So long."

"So long," said the boy.

Steele rowed out into the darkness.

IV

STEELE, with that infinite self-confidence which had led him into so many an awkward corner, and then led him out again, went alone to Pindoro. If, as he believed, the information he had been given was true, the quest he was on was a dangerous one, and he would bring no man

to share the danger. He dropped his little crew at Port Moresby, and went on alone, sailing by day and sleeping behind a sea anchor by night.

So he came to Pindoro one blazing afternoon, and hung about in the offing while the light held. When swift darkness fell he pressed inshore, all lights doused. The black bulk of the island loomed before him like some great monster risen from the slime of the sea, sleeping here under cover of night. He ran close in, let down the anchor, lowered the canoe he had especially brought, and paddled across the tranquil water into the shadow of the trees. Turning, he skirted them for a mile or more, until he found a narrow opening into which the sloop would fit.

He brought her there on a breath of wind that moved her scarcely at all, guided her between the drooping branches until they shut in behind her, cutting out the sea. There he made her fast, and slept peacefully until dawn.

Dawn showed him the gray-green mangroves and the dank water, and nothing more. But he glimpsed a flock of parrots red and green and blue against the sky, and knew that somewhere the water gave place to solid land, and the mangroves to bush. He climbed the mast, so commanding a fair enough view across the treetops, and looked for smoke; but there was none. There could be several explanations for that. But in the shimmering distance he saw something that looked like a wall of higher green. That would be the bush.

Steele slid down, and launched the canoe. He was dressed inconspicuously, in gray shirt and trousers, to harmonize with the color scheme about and render detection difficult at any distance. He brought with him his rifle and some food wrapped in a cloth, and a small keg of water.

A few strokes of the paddle brought him to the edge of the swamp, and the sea opened wide before him. Lazily he skirted it, keeping well within the shadow of the trees. He had no desire to warn Lemaire of his presence, still less to be shot. He played a lone hand, a hand that needed careful playing. To ruin his chances for the sake of a little easier paddling would be madness.

The island was bigger than he had thought. He had traversed miles of this northern side, and still it stretched before

him, hazy and vague in the distance. He had seen no sign of any channel into which a schooner could sail, and he began to wonder if the man in Papeete had lied. But Steele thought not. For some reason the man with the red beard had hated Lemaire. That was reason enough why he should tell the truth.

Steele rested a few hours about midday; for the heat here under the trees, damp and noxious, seemed to sap the strength of his muscles and his will. In the afternoon he went on. Mile after mile fell behind the gliding canoe, and still the trees rose in an unbroken line ahead. Only when the sun hovered on the rim of the world did Steele see the break in that green wall. It lay at an angle that rendered it more or less invisible from the sea, curving inward towards the heart of the island.

Steele slept in the canoe that night, and dawn brought a change in his plans. To return to the sloop now meant a wasted day; and, with the end so close, every day seemed precious. He had food and water enough to last him some time yet, and there was sure to be more for the taking, inland beyond the swamp. He followed the channel, keeping always within the shelter of the trees.

ALL day he followed it, while it led him steadily inland. Beyond a sluggish alligator here and there, and the wheeling parrots, he saw nothing. He was in a world of his own, shut in by the weary trees and the bubbling water.

The distance he covered that day was little enough, for he went warily, halting often to listen, or to scan the stretch of open water. What he expected to hear he could not have said, unless it was the creak of rigging or the sound of a human voice. He was anxious and impatient, knowing that the schooner might well be at sea on one of her raids.

But the schooner was not at sea. He saw, the following afternoon, something that made him go more warily than ever. It was a very small thing, but pregnant with significance—no more than a bottle floating lazily towards the sea. Anything else might have been explicable in some other way; but indisputably a bottle meant the presence of white men.

Steele saw the schooner in another hour. She lay to one side of the channel, close

against a bank of greenery that hid her spars. Solid land lay across there, Steele knew. Fearful that any watcher might glimpse him, he backed the canoe in far from the open water, then resumed his course.

As he had guessed it would, in a short time it led him to the boundary of the swamp. He climbed out, dry land beneath his feet, and gratefully stretched himself. Three days and two nights in the canoe had made him stiff.

The schooner, now, lay some little distance to his right. He waited for darkness, then moved towards her, swiftly for all his caution. His sense of direction led him to her straight as a homing pigeon.

He crouched amidst the undergrowth, watching her. She was in darkness; but there were men aboard. He heard their voices and their rough laughter. Obviously, no lights were to be shown above deck. Lemaire, Steele reflected grimly, did not lack for caution. But it seemed doubtful if his caution would help him now.

Steele, moving again, came to a path, well-trodden and definite, leading from the schooner to some point inland. Silently he went along it. He saw lights in front, and the greenness of a clearing in the bush. The stars were out now, revealing things with deceptive vagueness.

Steele saw huts to the number of half a dozen or more. They were large and well built, and had an air of comfort about them strangely out of place here on Pindoro. Their windows glowed red against the black wall of the bush. Steele heard voices, and once a man sang the stave of a song. Shadows moved across the windows. He saw on one, for an instant, the shadow of a girl's head, and his breath caught in his throat. Was the shadow Storm's? He dared not think it. For a year he had sought her, and for that year she had been here. He clenched his hands. Lemaire would pay. But he could never pay enough, though he gave his life in expiation for the crime he had committed.

One of the huts stood in darkness, and to this Steele walked. He was hungry, and there should be food in it. He opened the door, stepped in, closed it behind him. Halting then, he listened a moment. He heard no sound that could be interpreted as meaning danger. Even if he had been seen, the darkness must have hidden the

fact that he was a stranger. He struck a match, held it cupped in one hand, so that its light touched him but faintly. It showed him the room, and what the room held.

He found cold meat which he took to be venison, and half a flat loaf of bread. Of these he made a meal in the darkness, seated at the table, facing the door. When he had finished, he stuffed the remainder of the meat into his pocket. It would do for tomorrow. As he lifted back the chair, he heard steps outside, and a man whistling softly. A hand fumbled at the door, swung it open. Steele saw, vaguely, a figure against the outside grayness.

"Darn!" the man said, searching through his pockets for matches. "Where'n hell. . . ."

He shut the door, came groping forward. He touched Steele's arm, halted. In the moment that followed, neither man seemed to breathe. Then the newcomer spoke.

"Who's there?"

His voice was shaky, almost out of control.

Steele hit him. He fell sideways across the table, and rolled to the floor. There he lay motionless and silent. Steele felt for him, assured himself the man was genuinely unconscious, then left the hut. He regretted the meeting; but it had been unavoidable.

He halted in the bush on the edge of the clearing, curious to hear what would be said. More curious still to see Lemaire. For Lemaire, he knew, would come.

HE HAD not long to wait. The man in the hut recovered, stumbled to the door. The night was very still, and Steele, ears straining, heard almost every movement, every word that followed. The man, after some delay, opened the door, then fell across the threshold. And as he lay he shouted for assistance.

Other doors were opened, and voices called questions. Figures loomed up from the darkness, and the man was helped to his feet. One voice, a voice of unquestionable authority, came to Steele's ears.

"What's the matter, Kemp?"

"Darned if I know, boss," said the man thickly. "There was someone inside when I went in, an' when I asked who he was he nearly knocked my block off."

"The hell you say!" said that quick voice. "You've no idea who it was?"

"Not me," said the man. "It was too darned dark."

"Was it one of us, do you think?"

"It might ha' been." The speaker's tone was doubtful. "An' it might not. He was big, an' he has a punch like the kick of a mule."

"Hmm! Come inside and see if there's anything missing."

They went inside, and a match was touched to the lamp. Steele saw them clearly now through the open door. The man with the sharp voice was small and dark, better dressed than the others. Was he Lemaire? Steele thought it probable enough. He had an eager way of looking about him, like a bird. A revolver was thrust through the belt about his waist, though the other men seemed to be unarmed.

"There's grub missin'," said the man whom Steele had hit, glancing around.

"Grub?" said the slender man. "Are you sure, Kemp?"

"Aye, meat an' bread. I meant to have it for my supper."

The slender man glanced through the doorway at the darkness outside. "I wonder," he said softly, more to himself than to his companions. He stretched out one foot, kicked the door shut.

Steele moved swiftly as a startled cat. Half a dozen strides brought him to the door of the hut. He kicked it open, stood there framed in the oblong patch of light. He had not drawn a gun; but his hands rested lightly on his hips in readiness for action.

"Who are you?"

It was the slender man who spoke. Steele knew from his voice that he was unafraid. He had not moved, though the other men had drawn back against the wall of the hut.

"Mark Steele."

"Ah!" It was no more than a whisper, but it told Steele much.

"You are Lemaire?" Steele said.

The slender man nodded gravely.

"I am Lemaire."

"For a year I've hunted you," Steele continued evenly. "I searched for you from Singapore to the Low Islands, from Hawaii to Sydney; and you ran from me."

"Liar!" said Lemaire.

"You ran from me, I say! You set your thugs to murder me, and they failed. And

in the end you were betrayed. There's a traitor in every crew, Lemaire. I followed you here, and here I'll kill you, if——"

"If?" Lemaire said, without emotion.

"If you have here a girl called Storm."

"I have."

Steele crouched a little, became rigid. His eyes flamed; the pupils contracted to points of jet. He spoke between clenched teeth.

"You . . . *Draw!*"

One of the men behind Lemaire knocked down the lamp.

Steele, swearing, flung himself sideways from the door. A revolver roared within the hut, and the wind of the bullet fanned his cheek. He shot twice in reply, then bolted for the shelter of the bush. There was nothing else to be done. The men from the schooner would arrive presently, armed and ready for trouble. His opportunity was gone. But another would come. Now that he knew Storm was on the island, he must be careful. His failure would mean too much to her. He must not fail.

Swiftly, silently, he slipped through the bush, back to the canoe. Embarking, he paddled some distance into the mangroves, and there made fast. He could do nothing more till daylight came.

DAWN showed him men moving aboard the schooner. He watched them for an hour, secure in his place of hiding, and at length decided the vessel was being prepared for sea. It sent a shock of anger through him, anger and contempt. Did Lemaire think he could escape so easily? Had he so poor a faith in himself, with twenty men behind him, that he must run from one?

There were boats out now, pulling the schooner towards the middle of the channel. Steele pumped bullet after bullet into the still water, throwing up tall fountains of spray between, behind, and in front of the boats, until the magazine of his rifle was empty. The mangroves hid him, muffled and dispersed the sound of the shots. The men out there had no idea as to the direction from which the bullets came. They were in the vivid sunshine, Steele was in gloom.

He saw Lemaire, in the bow of the schooner, with angry gestures urging them to row; but they hesitated. Steele had made it very plain that he placed the bul-

lets where he pleased, and meant them only as a warning. His next shots might be fired at the boats themselves, not merely close to them. He could with ease have shot Lemaire; but that was not his idea of vengeance.

The men rowed again, but hesitantly, with a poor will. Steele sent a bullet into the stern of the leading boat. He saw the white chips fly; the men hung on their oars. Lemaire beckoned them, ran to the cabin, reappeared with a rifle in his hands. The boats cast loose from the tow line, vanished behind the schooner. Steele, watching grimly, saw a man carry rifles across the deck, pass them down to the men below. Lemaire had dropped into one of the boats. If that was the game they meant to play, Steele thought, it suited him well enough.

The boats reappeared, headed for the mangroves. In the stern of one Lemaire sat, the rifle across his knees. They reached the trees, plunged abruptly from sunshine into twilight. They were unwieldy here, cumbersome in comparison to the slender canoe. Because of the crowding stems, the oars had to be lifted from the rowlocks, and used as paddles. Steele laughed softly as he sent the canoe gliding between the trees. It amused him to see how twenty men could be harassed by one.

He led them on and on, deeper into the twilight stretches, until at a word from Lemaire they halted. They had not seen Steele once. Now, he slid across an open space, full in their view. It was dangerous; but it served his purpose. Lemaire shouted, flung the rifle to his shoulder. The bullet went by Steele's head with a sound like the snapping of a stick. Then he was hidden again, the boats moving as rapidly as possible in his trail.

Silent and elusive as a will-o'-the-wisp, he lured them on and on, now and then affording them a fleeting glimpse of the canoe to keep them in pursuit. Once they halted resolutely, and turned back; and then Steele, precariously erect, waved and shouted at Lemaire. The sound of his voice went echoing weirdly through the dim aisles. It almost cost him his life, for the bullet which Lemaire sent in reply plucked at the shoulder of his shirt. But the boats came on again.

Then, abruptly, Steele ended the game. He swung the canoe widely to one side,

waited a little distance on, and watched the boats go past. Then, as rapidly as possible, he headed back towards the schooner.

He found her without difficulty, and, leaving the canoe well hidden, made for the clearing and the huts. He went cautiously, for this was the hottest hour of the day, and the bush was very still.

On the edge of the clearing he halted. There was in sight nothing that lived but a sleek black monkey drowsing at the end of a chain. It awoke as Steele crossed the clearing, and chattered angrily.

A man lay asleep in the first hut Steele entered. Against the side of his bunk a rifle stood cocked; he reached for this, half consciously, as the door opened and shut. Steele leaped the intervening space, brought the butt of one revolver down hard. The man fell back, breathing stertorously. He would not move for another hour at least.

Steele glanced around, saw nothing here to interest him. He opened the door, stepped out.

Too late he saw the falling shadow, and twisted sideways. The blow caught him glancingly on the back of the head. He stumbled forward on his knees, and heavy figures leaped on him, like lions on a fallen buffalo. He shook them off, fighting in grim silence; and gained his feet. But others smashed at him with clubs, and in an instant he went down again. This time he did not stir. They lifted him, carried him into a hut, bound his wrists and ankles, and took his guns. There they left him.

V

A VOICE was calling to him, calling, calling. An unfamiliar voice, yet one he knew. Lying there, he puzzled about it, and about the pain in his head. He was afraid to open his eyes, because the glare of the sun would make the pain worse, and it was bad enough already.

There were hands pulling at him now, small hands, without much strength in them. One brushed his face with an odd, disturbing motion, and smoothed back his hair.

"Mark! Wake up, Mark, *please!*"

Steele, lazily, opened his eyes.

It was Storm who bent over him, Storm, pale faced and anxious. Her eyes lit

wonderfully as he stirred, and a touch of color stole back into her cheeks.

"I was afraid you were—dying." She whispered the word.

"Not me," said Steele. He struggled to sit up, but found it difficult because of the ropes that bound him.

"Be still," Storm said. He glimpsed naked steel; then the ropes fell from his wrists. She treated similarly those that bound his ankles. He stood up.

"My guns?"

"Here." She took them from the floor behind her.

"Ah!" He breathed his relief. He felt safer now, the two smooth butts close to his hands. "We'd better be moving on. You'll come with me, Storm?"

"No."

He took her by the shoulders.

"But . . . I came for you! I love you!"

She flushed, stared at the floor.

"I cannot go, Mark, I cannot!" She pushed him towards the door. "You must hurry, before they come back and kill you. Hurry! Get away from here, from the island!"

"My God!" Steele said, despairingly. "You choose to stay here . . . Storm, you're mad! I ask nothing of you, just to get you away from here. . . ."

"I must stay," she said quietly. "And you must go. Please!"

Her hand was on the door when Lemaire opened it, brushed her aside. At sight of Steele he stiffened, drew his gun with the speed of a striking rattler. Steele knocked it from his hand, menaced him with the unwavering muzzle of a Colt.

"Your trick," Lemaire said.

"Shut the door!" Steele said between his teeth.

Lemaire obeyed. His glance went to the girl.

"I suppose I have to thank you for this?"

Steele jerked up the revolver.

"Don't speak to her! This is where we settle up accounts, Lemaire."

"Surely," said Lemaire sardonically, "I have a right to speak to my own daughter?"

"Your—daughter?"

Lemaire nodded. He was laughing silently, and Steele knew it. He appealed to the girl.

"Is that true?" His eyes sought hers.

"Yes," Storm said tonelessly. She touched Steele's hand that held the gun. "Please, please! He is my father."

Steele, shrugging, dropped the weapon into its holster, but his eyes held Lemaire as well as the cold muzzle had done.

"That alters things," he said. "A little. But only a little. She comes away with me."

A hot flame of anger danced in Lemaire's eyes.

"You think so?"

"If she will be my wife," Steele said, "not you nor your twenty men could keep her here."

Lemaire rubbed his chin. He still laughed, deep behind his expressionless face.

"She may go, if she wishes. And we shall be glad to see the last of *you*."

Steele felt for the girl's hand, took it gently.

"You will, Storm?"

"Yes."

"You have my blessing," said Lemaire. "You might be glad to hear her story? When I was younger, I married. I must have been cruel, for my wife ran away from me soon after our daughter was born. Or perhaps it was that she did not agree with my ideas of honesty. However, I thought them both dead until a year ago, when I heard of the girl on Andavu. The dates coincided exactly, so I knew her for my daughter. And I added her to the spoils."

"Why?" Steele's voice was menacing.

Lemaire shrugged.

"With the best of intentions. I was her father; at least I could support her. And I wanted companionship here on the island. I think she has been happy, though she had my reform in mind. Take her, with my blessing."

Steele laughed grimly.

"It doesn't end so easily as that. You've played hell with the pearlers for the last two years. You smashed my lugger and set your murderers on me. On *me*!"

"I thought you might make trouble," Lemaire said coolly. "And, as you see, I was right."

"You were," said Steele. "If it wasn't for Storm here, I'd make more. As it is, you quit!"

"I quit?"

"You quit. Right now! You turn honest."

Lemaire laughed.

"You think you can threaten me? Why, I played with you this morning. At first, I meant to take the schooner out, and leave a dozen of my men to account for you. Then, when I followed you with the boats, I left them watching for you here, because I knew you meant to return. And now they are all about us."

"Maybe. But if one of them so much as looks in at the window, it means the end for you."

Lemaire measured him with narrowed eyes.

"You mean that?"

"I do."

The slender man shrugged.

"You cannot remain here always."

"No; but if I hear that you've stolen so much as a colored marble from a child, I'll collect a few friends and come back here to Pindoro and wipe you off the map." Steele snapped finger and thumb. "Like that! I can do it, and you know I can do it, Lemaire. Take your choice."

Lemaire laughed, though his face was pale.

"I'm too old to make a change now; but it seems the only thing to be done. The choice is poor."

"You're lucky to be given any," Steele said. And he meant it. He drew one gun, nodded towards the door, took Storm's arm. "Walk quickly, Lemaire; but not too quickly. I'll tell you the way."

There were men about the clearing. Steele walked close behind Lemaire, the muzzle of the revolver pressed against his back. Some of the men stirred, started forward; but Lemaire imperiously waved them back. But Steele did not feel safe until he followed Storm into the canoe. Lemaire, smiling sardonically, watched them go.

"Remember," Steele called, "one break, and . . ." He waved the rifle.

"I will remember," said the man on the bank.

By nightfall they had found the sloop, and dawn found them far out to sea, Steele at the helm, the girl curled up at his feet, her head against his knees. Astern, Pindoro had dropped below the horizon.



WINDIGO MOOSE

The Great White Beast No Man Could Kill

By SEWELL PEASLEE WRIGHT

MORE tightly now Wilford M. Holbrook, M.D., gripped the cold barrel of his rifle, his long, pale fingers twitching.

"Try him again, Garraud," whispered the doctor eagerly. "He'll lose interest and go away."

Garraud, a huge, bulky figure in the twilight, shook his head. It gave him a peculiar, perverse delight to lord it over the "sports" he guided. God, they were ignorant! He fingered the bristly stubble on his battered, savage chin, hiding his smile.

"Nope, can't do that, Doc," he replied. "They get suspicious if the cow calls too often. About every fifteen or twenty minutes is best."

"But, damn it, he's answered us!" exclaimed Holbrook, with very unprofessional excitement. "He's a big old devil with a voice like the whistle of the *Leviathan*. It's a chance for a record head, I tell you. Confound it, speak to him!"

Garraud shrugged his massive shoulders and picked up the battered birchbark horn.

"Have it your way, Doc. But the bigger they are, the warier they are." Shaking his

head sullenly, to show his disapproval of the matter, he lifted the horn to his lips and "spoke moose."

The resonant roll of birchbark sent its ridiculously plaintive, oddly thrilling call rolling out over the water, breaking the deep silence of the northern twilight. The last coaxing little squeal died into silence against a distant, echoing ridge of *brulé*, and almost instantly the bull responded.

"*R-r-r-ugh! R-r-r-ugh!*" Startlingly near, indescribably savage, came the answer.

"He's right over there in that green stuff," whispered Garraud tensely. Something in the terrific bass of the coughing reply had set even the bushman's heart to thumping madly against his ribs. This was no common moose, and an odd excitement had seized Garraud.

"I know—I know," whispered Holbrook, his eyes shining behind his glasses. His fingers played up and down the barrel of his rifle as though upon a flute. "Answer him, Garraud. Get him out into the clearing where I can shoot. Talk to him, man!"

Garraud nodded, his dark eyes roving

ceaselessly. The wind was just right, and they were well hidden. He put the horn to his lips again, cupping one huge hand lightly over the large end, to slightly muffle the sound.

This time it was not the plaintive coaxing of the cow, but the challenging cough of a bull that Garraud mimicked. Three times the challenge sounded, and instantly the answer came from the thick growth of spruce and hemlock only a couple of hundred yards away.

Garraud coughed disdainfully through the horn, and then, removing the horn from his lips, slashed the hollow bark against some dead branches.

"He'll think there's another bull here, Doc," explained Garraud. "That'll fetch them when nothing else will. I——"

Of a sudden there came a terrific crashing, a sound like a freight train running wild through the bush. A charging moose makes an unbelievable amount of sound.

"Get ready, Doc," whispered Garraud. "He's comin'. My God, listen to him! Any time now—wait till he's about halfway here and then let him have it—I'll tell you when—*here he comes!*"

They could see the tops of the smaller hemlocks and the close-growing red willows bend and sway before the terrific onslaught, as the long marsh grass dips and shudders when the northern wind sweeps down upon it. With a terrific crashing of branches and a bellowing grunt of rage, the moose charged out into the clearing.

Holbrook, staring rigidly down the barrel of his rifle, felt himself grow suddenly cold with something akin to fear. Were his eyes deceiving him? Had he gone mad with the excitement? Or was——

A heavy hand, with fingers that bit like steel clamps, fell on Holbrook's arm.

"God, do you see it?" Garraud whispered hoarsely, his dark eyes bulging in their bloodshot sockets. "It's white! A white moose! *Shoot—for God's sake, shoot!*"

Instinctively Holbrook obeyed. He was a good shot, one of the best in the rifle club at home, and his rifleman's training had kept his sights lined up fairly on the target. Through the big rear aperture the gold bead of the front sight rested fairly on the plunging shoulder of the moose. With something like a sob, Holbrook pressed the trigger.

"Pinwheel five," was the thought that

flashed through his mind; a shot squarely in the center of the bull's-eye. On the rifle range it was the doctor's habit to call his shots before they were marked; he did it unconsciously now. He knew that shot was true.

The ponderous body of the charging moose braced itself, and for a moment the huge beast seemed to stand motionless, like a moose carved from his own native snow.

For, as Garraud had said, this moose was white; a white that shone like burnished silver in the level rays of the sun. Even the long sharp hoofs and the great palmated antlers were white, like precious gleaming ivory. He loomed up larger than any moose Garraud had ever seen; like a nightmare moose. There was something terrible, unnatural, about the great beast, and the two men crouched motionless, Holbrook frozen to his rifle, Garraud clutching the doctor's arm, both staring at the apparition that the crash of the rifle had struck so suddenly motionless.

"Got him!" muttered Holbrook mechanically.

As if he had heard the words, the huge beast threw back his head, pivoting on his hind legs.

"Shoot!" shouted Garraud, leaping to his feet. "Shoot—shoot——"

Startled into action, Holbrook slammed the bolt of his rifle back and home again, and once more the crashing report shattered the silence.

The beast never faltered; Holbrook knew the shot was wild.

"Damn you," screamed Garraud, "you missed him again! Oh, damn you, you missed him!"

But Holbrook did not hear. He had slumped forward against a shattered stump, his face a ghastly gray, his pursy, good-natured mouth sagging open.

"Heart . . ." he whispered, and made a vague movement with one hand.

THIS was the first meeting of man and the white moose of the Lac Bourbeux country. But—and men told the story of these later meetings with grave faces—it was not the last meeting.

Where the great monster had come from, none knew. The moose is, at certain times of the year, a great traveler. From some region as wild and untamed as his own unnatural self, this weird white beast had

come, and he ranged the country like a spirit of evil.

Men spoke of him with grave faces, and eyes filled with superstitious fear. For had not the doctor, Holbrook, who had come north for his health, died from the excitement of his meeting with the white moose? Had not Garraud, who had also seen the beast, broken his leg a few days later, just at the time he should have gone onto his trap line?

More than this, Joe Ganther had been found beside his own campfire, horribly trampled and gored, with his rifle, the fired shell still in the chamber, a few feet away. And, caught in the rough bark of a hemlock, at the foot of which lay Joe's mangled body, were a number of long, stiff white hairs that could only have come from the white moose.

A few days later Les Winthrop had paddled up to the H. B. post on Animuse Lake, and dropped exhausted when he tried to step out of his canoe. When he recovered he told a strange story of misfortune that had begun the day after he and his partner had seen and shot at the white moose. They had come home to find their main camp burned down, with all their provisions; in cutting wood for a fire, Les had cut his foot badly with the ax, and two days later his partner had been killed by a treacherous stub that fell without the slightest warning, as stubs have a way of doing.

Evil fortune seemed to travel in the trail of the white moose. Not only this, but men began to whisper that the white moose was *windigo*—an Indian word which can be translated either as "bewitched" or "taboo." It is a word that is very bad medicine.

The white moose, they reasoned, must be *windigo*, for bullets would not harm him. Half a dozen men had shot at the white moose—men of the North country, who could shoot straight—and not one of them had brought blood.

It is no wonder that men spoke of the white moose with grave faces. Aloud, they laughed at the superstitions of the Indians and the breeds, but they laughed with uneasy eyes. The bushman knows that strange things happen in the lonely, silent stretches of the snow country, and of these things he has much time to think during the long nights.

The cold, dreary, rainy days of bush country autumn merged into the windy,

snowy days of early winter, and for a long time there was no word of the white moose.

"I bet he's left the country," said Garraud, spitting dogmatically into the sand box beneath the stove. "I wish to hell he'd stayed long enough for me to get a crack at him, that's all. I'd *windigo* him proper!"

"Maybe," remarked little Jules Lebec. Lebec was three-fourths Cree, and he knew what he knew.

"Maybe hell!" growled Garraud. "That .303 of mine is *windigo* proof. If he hasn't skipped, I'll get him yet—and the five hundred dollars that collector feller is offerin' for the head and hide."

There was a peculiar, dissenting murmur at the words. With the exception of Garraud and Keegan, the owner of the post, all the men in the room had Indian blood in their veins, and they bitterly resented Garraud's attitude.

"Closed season on moose, Garraud," commented Keegan quietly, coming out from behind the huge plank counter across which he had been leaning. He was a peculiarly dangling sort of man, was Keegan; his feet dangling from his legs, his huge hands dangling from his arms, and both arms and legs dangling from his body. His jaws, his ears, even his eyes, seemed to be precariously attached to his body. He looked clumsy of body and slow of mind, but he was neither.

Keegan was the only man in the Lac Bourbeux country that could master Garraud, so he was not clumsy. And he was a freetrader, who matched his wits in trade with shrewd, hard-bargaining men; so he was not slow of mind. He was—just Keegan.

"Closed season—what's that got to do with it?" snarled Garraud. "There ain't a trapper in the country that don't kill half a dozen or more every winter, for dog feed. You know that. Why talk about closed seasons?"

"Killing for dog meat is one thing; killing for sport out of season is something else again," said Keegan quietly.

Before Garraud could reply the broad battened door flew open, admitting an icy draft of air, a swirl of snow, and two white and shaggy figures.

The newcomers were Stephane Laviss and Sadi Venette. They had gone out together some time ago, to feed their dogs but evidently they had found some refresh

ments for their own use in one of the packs, for they were chanting lustily as they lurched into the room, their arms affectionately around each other's neck.

Venette was only moderately drunk, for he was accustomed to liquor, but Lavissee, never a heavy drinker, was maudlin, with wobbly knees and a sagging jaw.

"Damn it, Venette, how many times have I told you not to bring that rotten booze around here?" snapped Keegan, frowning. The others grinned, Garraud the broadest of all. Garraud disliked Keegan, and anything that angered Keegan pleased Garraud.

"Eet ees cel'bration, Keeg'n," explained Lavissee, leaning against the counter and waving one mittened hand very seriously in the trader's general direction. "Venette, he help me cel'brate, *hein?*"

Despite his anger, Keegan half smiled. Lavissee was such a sober, serious fellow as a general thing that he was particularly ludicrous in his present condition.

"What you celebrating, Stephane? Has Marie presented you with another little Lavissee?"

Lavissee shook his head loosely.

"*Non*. Not now, *M'sieu'*. I cel'brate the good luck that come to me. Two, t'ree week ago, he come, stay near my beeg camp. I theenk he ees good luck, maybe. I do nothing to hurt heem. And good luck, in my trapping, in my camp, it come to me. *Sacre nom du nom!* Sadi, once more, *oui?*"

"No boozing here!" interrupted Keegan sharply. "You hear, Venette?"

Venette, the shameless one, nodded and smiled sheepishly, but Lavissee drew himself up to his full height, indignantly. He was not a tall man, even then.

"Tomorrow early I leave for my own camp," he said with drunken gravity. "Eet ees that I am not welcome here after I mak' the trading, eh? I shall go back, and my Marie and the babies weel be glad to see me, *certainment*. And the white moose, also, for ees he not the frien' of Stephane Lavissee, and a bringer of much good luck?"

"What?" Garraud leaped across the room, and shook Lavissee by the shoulders. "Say that again!" he said, thrusting his puffed face close. "Speak up, damn you!"

But Lavissee, drunk as he was, suddenly realized he had said too much.

His good-natured little mouth closed grimly, ~~stubb~~ly, and he shook his head.

"I do not understan', *M'sieu'*," he said doggedly, in the maddening way of ignorant men who do not wish to talk. "I theenk perhaps I am too drunk, *hein? M'sieu' weel pardon?*"

GARRAUD sent twenty feet of lash slithering through the air and flecked a bit of hair from the off forward shoulder of his lead dog.

"When I say 'mush' then you mush!" he growled as he gathered up the long lash in great loops. The long, keen lash shot out again and cracked like the report of a pistol. The dogs cast quick, furtive glances over their shoulders, and picked up their pace, although their weariness and the heavy load made anything faster than a sharp trot an utter impossibility.

"That's more like it!" snarled Garraud. He was in an angry mood, for his foot had never healed well from the ax cut, and he had been mushing since daybreak. It was getting dark, and he had not yet reached Lavissee's headquarters camp. His foot hurt like all hell. His dogs, great, starving beasts with scarred heads and cowering, sullen eyes, seemed stubborn and lazy. Garraud had not eaten on the trail, even refusing himself the cheery comfort of hot tea, and the intense cold began to strike into him as his vitality ebbed.

But he kept on. Garraud had a dogged, one-track nature, and perhaps his one admirable trait was that he was no quitter. He had planned to make Lavissee's camp by that night, and make it by night he would, or drive both himself and the dogs until they dropped in the trail.

Just as it grew too dark to use the whip with any degree of accuracy, the dogs scrambled down a low, steep bank and out onto the rough surface of a small lake. On the far side was a tiny pinpoint of yellow light that Garraud knew came from the window of Lavissee's headquarters camp.

As he approached, the distant barking of dogs informed Garraud that Lavissee was at the camp, and Garraud frowned. He had hoped the little breed would be on his trap line. It would have saved trouble. However . . . Garraud shrugged his shoulder carelessly. He had come to get the head and hide of the white moose. Five hundred dollars it would bring; five hundred dollars clear profit. Lavissee was a fool at best; he was a very big fool if he tried to butt in

now, Garraud decided. With something of this grim determination showing on his face, he came up to Lavissee's camp.

The little breed, warned by the barking of his dogs that a stranger was approaching, met Garraud at the door. There was a happy, hospitable smile on his face, but as he recognized his visitor, the smile quickly faded, and a worried look came into the simple, kindly blue eyes.

"Ah, *M'sieu'*!" he exclaimed, "Come een, come een. You have meet my Marie, *oui*? And the leetle wans, *non*?"

Garraud nodded carelessly, and while Lavissee's little wife hurried silently about the business of getting the evening meal, the two men sat and talked.

Both avoided any reference to the object of Garraud's visit. Lavissee had much of the courtesy of the French, and as host it was impossible for him to so question his visitor. And Garraud took a peculiar delight in refusing to satisfy the little man's natural curiosity—although Garraud was sure that Lavissee could have made a very good guess as to Garraud's intentions. The little man had not been too drunk to forget everything.

They ate in silence, as is the bush custom, and afterwards, while Marie washed dishes and put the children to bed, the two men sat and smoked, discussing the weather, the fur catch, and the politics of the Province and Dominion with the seriousness of men who think much more than they talk.

Still Garraud said nothing of the white moose. Instead, he got out his sleeping robe, spread it near the stove, and grunted good-night to the little breed and his wife. No use starting arguments and trouble now. Time enough in the morning. Garraud fell asleep almost immediately, and slept dreamlessly until dawn, sleeping as only a man with a case-hardened conscience can sleep.

Garraud finished his breakfast and lit his pipe. Then he turned to Lavissee.

"Lavissee, where does that white moose of yours hang out?" he asked casually.

The little breed flushed angrily, frowning.

"Why does *M'sieu'* weesh to know?" he asked, after a moment's hesitation.

"Because he's worth five hundred dollars to me, and I'm goin' to collect," said Garraud brutally. "Where is he?"

"He—has gone."

"You're lying, Lavissee," replied Garraud

coolly. "He wouldn't travel in this kind of weather, with the crust the way it is. He couldn't. Now where is he?" There was a threat as well as a question in the last words.

For a moment the little man contemplated fight, but he realized instantly that he would have no chance in the world against Garraud.

"Leesen, *M'sieu'*," he pleaded desperately, "these white moose, he breeng me much luck. I have protect' heem. For see you, *M'sieu: le Bon Dieu*, he mak' manee, manee black moose, but only theese one so *trés jolie* white moose. Eees that not so? Eet would be bad, vairy bad, to shoot thees one white moose. I——"

"Hell!" exclaimed Garraud wearily. "Don't talk such damned foolishness. That bull's head and hide are worth five hundred dollars to me. I'm goin' to collect. So save your breath and don't argue. You goin' to tell me where he's ranging, and save me the trouble?"

"No!" said Lavissee. The word was not spoken loudly, but the monosyllable fairly crackled with the little man's passion. "And before you go—remember what has happen to the *docteur*, to Joe Ganther, to the partner of *M'sieu'* Winthrop, and to others, also, who try to keel theese white moose that *le Bon Dieu* has made to be beautiful and hurt no one who do not first try to hurt heem. I am warning you, *M'sieu'*; theese moose ees *windigo*; he ees——"

Garraud took a quick step forward, his face swollen and red with anger.

"I told you to quit your croakin'," he snapped, and struck the little man squarely on the jaw with a force that lifted Lavissee from his feet and sent his unconscious body sprawling backwards to fall in a crumpled heap against the wall. Marie screamed; a short, sharp sound that was more of anger than of fear, and more of hate than either. The children started whimpering and huddled closely around their mother.

"I told him to shut up," growled Garraud, picking up his belongings, "but he wouldn't. I didn't hurt him none, and when he comes around, tell him not to butt in on what ain't his business, see?"

Marie said not a word, but her black eyes bored like glinting gimlets into the hulking figure by the door. Muttering something under his breath, Garraud passed outside, and slammed the door behind him.

With a soft cry like the mother sound of a bird, Marie ran to the side of her husband and bent over him with eyes that were all tenderness now.

FOR two days Garraud searched restlessly for the trail of the white moose. There were many moose trails, but they did not lead to the great pale beast that Garraud had seen once, and which even now gave him a strange, uncanny thrill when he thought of his first meeting with the *windigo* moose.

"I'll get him. By God, I'll get him!" growled the big man as he started out the third day. "He's here somewhere—five hundred dollars' worth of moose. I'll keep goin' until spring, but I'll get him!"

The morning's work was fruitless, but a few minutes after he started out again that afternoon, he ran across a trail that set his heart thumping against his ribs.

No common moose had made that trail! Those were the prints of no ordinary hoofs; only a spread of horns almost unbelievable would have caused the trail to pass around instead of between those two far-spaced trees.

"It's him!" whispered Garraud to himself, and his face was oddly white and tense. "The big white bull. It's his trail—and it's fresh!"

A peculiar excitement began to boil up in him. He tingled in every fiber, as though from some internal dynamo that had suddenly started whirring. His stomach had drawn up into a hard and aching knot.

Impatiently he pulled off a mitten and stuck his hand, fingers spread, out before him. The strong, blunt fingers were as steady as though carved from wood. Garraud smiled triumphantly and quickly drew on the mitten.

The trail, as Garraud had already noted, was fresh. The moose would not travel far, with the crust as hard as it was. Garraud would have to leave the trail and circle a bit, so as to come up the wind, but that was all. It was very simple. He had stalked moose many times, and knew exactly how it was done.

In some tight little clump of evergreen the huge white bull, the *windigo* moose, worth five hundred dollars, would be standing, watching his back trail, and sniffing the wind for any sign of danger. But Garraud would not be following the trail

closely, nor would he be coming down the wind. He would approach the tight little clump of evergreens from one side, perhaps from the rear, and then . . . Garraud's avaricious eyes gloated.

Garraud played the game cautiously. For all his excitement, his animal cunning did not desert him. An hour, two hours, slipped whitely, silently by, and still the big man had not caught sight of his prey. And then, suddenly, he heard a twig crack, startlingly close, and there was the white moose!

The animal was not more than a hundred yards away, the major portion of his body concealed by a thick growth of young hemlocks. His great proud head, with its flaring, massive antlers, was clearly visible, and something like a cold thrill of fear swept over Garraud. There was something weirdly unnatural about this gigantic, snow-white beast. Garraud brought his strong yellow teeth together with a snap, and his lips drew back in a vicious snarl. The fixed, intent light in his streaked eyes was the light that shines in the slanting eyes of a timber wolf when it sees its helpless prey. Slowly, fatefully, he raised his rifle, and swept the barrel around until the sight rested unwaveringly on the white, proud head.

His finger tightened around the trigger, but before the sear slipped and the hammer fell, a sudden thought dropped with a crash into Garraud's brain. He took the rifle from his shoulder with trembling hands.

"God, I'm dumb!" he whispered. "Right in the head. That would have ruined him, sure. I'll have to get him through the forehead shoulder. That won't mess him up none. Wish he'd hurry and move clear of them trees."

Garraud did not dare to move himself, for cover was scarce, and there was crust enough to make walking noisy. Sooner or later the moose would take a few steps forward, and expose the vital area Garraud had selected. In the meantime, there was nothing to do but wait, and with the best possible grace, Garraud waited, while the long minutes slipped by.

He kept his eyes fixed almost unwinkingly upon the great white head of the moose, admiring the tremendous spread of the ivory horns as they winked in the sun.

"What a spread, what a spread!" he whispered in awe. "Must be six good feet

from tip to tip. And white as snow."

His reflections were interrupted by a sound from behind; he turned sharply, nervously, but saw nothing. "Gettin' jumpy," he growled to himself. "This waitin' is enough to make anybody jumpy. I'll be takin' a chance, and shooting through the branches, if he don't get a move on pretty quick."

Ten minutes, a quarter of an hour, dragged by, and at last the moose moved. Disdainfully tossing the great palmated ivory antlers, the white moose took a few careless steps forward and gazed back along its trail, head high, huge nostrils filtering the air.

Garraud raised his rifle quickly, exultantly. The light of the killer wolf shone in his streaked eyes again. God, what luck! It was a perfect shot. He could not miss. Tensely but steadily his fingers pressed the trigger.

There was a sudden crackling of brittle crust; a shout of warning. Startled, Garraud gripped the trigger and the rifle roared; an unbelievable crash of sound.

Garraud snarled a terrific oath and whirled, just in time to meet the flying body of Stephane Lavisse.

Lavisse plunged a stinging fist into Garraud's frosted face, and the big man grunted. As he did so, he swung the heavy .303 by the muzzle, and the stock crashed against the little man's body. With an agonized gasp, Lavisse staggered back and collapsed in the snow.

Instantly Garraud worked the lever of his rifle and swung back to where the moose had been. He felt sure he had hit the beast, but knew that his shot had not gone entirely true.

Garraud's instinct had not misinformed him. His bullet had struck, barely nicking, the massive neck of the white moose. It was not even a bloody wound, but it was one that for a few moments might be horribly painful.

With the crash of the rifle and the searing impact of the bullet, the beast leaped forward with a stentorian snort that was the essence of savage anger. For a moment the huge, towering body seemed to hesitate, and then, with amazing speed the great beast plunged forward, driven by surging muscles spurred by fear and anger—or perhaps only anger.

Garraud swung around just as the *windigo*

moose lowered his massive head and charged, and the big man's face drained to a dirty white against which the black smear of his beard was startlingly prominent.

"Oh, God!" he whined, and jerked the rifle to his shoulder. He tried desperately to line up the sights, but his hands shook as though with the ague. Blindly he pulled the trigger.

The rifle spoke to the distant hills, but Garraud's shot was not true. Before he could fire again, the moose caught the weapon on its broad antlers and sent it whirling through the air. It snorted, and its breath came from the huge nostrils like swirling steam.

The huge body, with its glistening white hair, loomed over Garraud. The wide antlers of ivory, heavy and cruel, with long, pointed tines, swung glittering in the sun. Ivory hoofs, sharp and pointed, lifted—struck!

Garraud screamed, shrilly, like a stricken horse. Like a moose screams when paunched. A ghastly sound that quivered painfully in the icy air.

The baleful red eyes of the white moose gleamed like coals in the dark, and a slashing antler tore at the bloody huddle in the snow. The ivory palmation came up with little dark trickles streaming down the creamy surface, and again the great beast snorted, as the hateful smell of blood rose into his huge and sensitive nostrils.

The thing in the snow did not move beneath the spurning, pointed hoofs or the rending tines of the great ivory antlers. The huge white moose backed away a few steps, raised his great majestic head and looked around.

A few feet away was another bundle of clothes in the snow; but this one moved. The proud head tossed angrily, and new flame flared up in the blood-red eyes.

A vagrant flurry, whirling and twisting through the trees, brought the scent to the white bull, and the cavernous nostrils flared and contracted eagerly, like the gasping gills of a fish.

The flame died in the red eyes. The great beast turned and looked down again at the red-trampled snow before him. Again he snorted, a blend of triumph and disdain in the sound.

Then, very quietly, without a glance around, the *windigo* moose turned and trotted away into the bush.

SEVERAL days later Stephane Lavissee told the whole story to Keegan, the freetrader, that Keegan might call the Red Coats. The law must know when men pass on in the North country. Lavissee was just a little afraid of the law of the Red Coats, as so many simple and honest men are afraid of the law and its power.

"An' so, *M'sieu'*, after he has gone away, I get up and go to Garraud, but—he ees ver' dead. The white moose, he ees *windigo*; those who try keel him, he keel instead. *Le Bon Dieu* deed not weesh eet that the white moose be keel. He ees a thing so *jolie*—Eet ees betaire that we do not try to make of him meat. Ees eet not so, *M'sieu'* Keegan?"

Keegan draped the lanky, jointed length of his body across the heavy counter, resting his chin in the cupped palm of his hands.

"I reckon I'll never get to see the old boy—you said he'd left your territory?"

Lavissee nodded sadly.

"I find hees tracks. I follow them one day. North he goes, *M'sieu'*; north where there are no men. Where he come from. I theenk he well nevair come back."

"I imagine not. I sure would have liked to get a glimpse of him though," mused Keegan. "Sometimes I wonder if there really was a white moose; strange stories start with little or no foundation in this

country, Lavissee. You know that, well."

Lavissee smiled; the cunning, guileless smile of a simple man who has an unexpected card up his sleeve.

"When Garraud shoot that last time, he do not miss entirely," said Lavissee, reaching in an inner pocket. "I find this in the snow. Has *M'sieu'* seen the like before?"

With a gesture that was unconsciously dramatic, Lavissee placed something on the dark, time-stained counter; something that gleamed like polished ivory in the semi-gloom of the room.

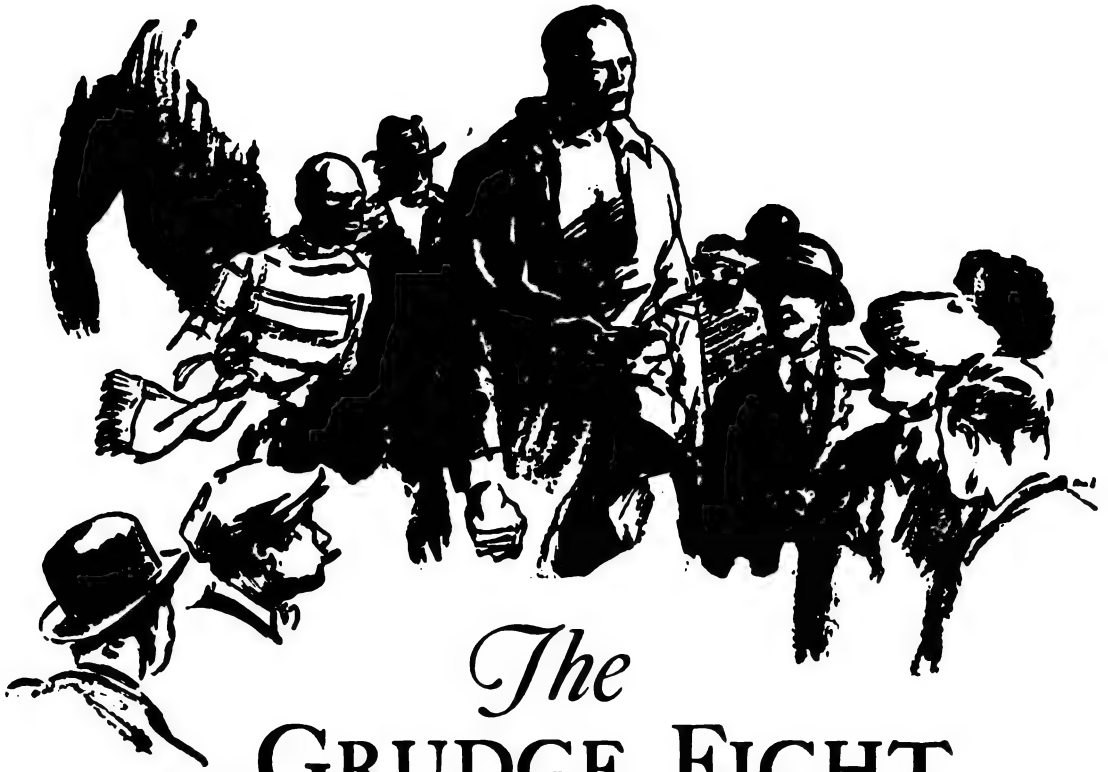
"One of the points from the horn of the *windigo* moose," said Lavissee simply. "Eet ees the last we shall see of heem, *hein?*"

"*Windigo*" mused Keegan, staring down at the bit of ivory-white horn. "'Taboo' is about as close as that can be translated, I'd say."

He thought of Garraud. A bleak look came into his eyes. "I told him there was a lot the Indians and breeds believed that a white should not laugh at because he can't explain it," he thought.

Very gravely he watched Lavissee pick up the bit of ivory antler and wrap it tenderly, almost reverently, in a bit of clean red flannel.

"The Red Coats weel see thees, to show I speak true," said Lavissee. "Ees eet not so, *M'sieu'* Keegan?"



The GRUDGE FIGHT

A Stark and Powerful Tale of the Prize Ring

By WALTER W. LIGGETT

"YEH. I was up to Sing Sing to see him—to say good-by—in the Death House it was—you know he gets the works tonight. God! It gives me the creeps. Pour me another shot o' gin."

"Is he——"

"Game? Yeh, game as a pebble. There never was no yellow in Battlin' Brocco. He *wants* to die—that's the trouble. We could have saved him if he'd have let us come clean with the judge—told everything—I think the governor'd have reprieved him, too, if he'd known all the facts. But the Battler wouldn't stand for it. Said he'd rather take his medicine. I dunno as I blame him. Sometimes I think I'd like to trade places with him. Pour me another shot. It's cold in here. Don't you feel cold?"

"But I thought——"

"Oh, I'll tell yuh all about it—I've got to tell someone. And somehow I'd like to tell yuh before they give him the juice. It'll be in another hour now. God! It's like waiting for the gong in a big bout, only this time the Battler ain't got a chance.

He'll never even leave his corner. That's what hurts, Kid. He ain't got a chance. He didn't from the first—and it'll be his first knockout and his last.

"By God! It don't seem right to bump him off that way—not Battlin' Brocco. Why don't they give the poor kid a chance. Let him take it standing, fighting anyway. But to put the juice to him when he's strapped there in the chair—that's what was eatin' him. It's that and a whole lot more that's eatin' me, I'm telling you. Yeh, fill it up again. I understand now what they mean by cold feet. That Death House sure give 'em to me. I been shiverin' ever since. No, never mind the ginger ale. I'll take it straight.

"You was out West, wasn't you when it happened? Oh, down at Tia Juana? Followin' the ponies. That's what I'll be doin' next. I'm sure through with the fight game for keeps. So is Frankie Flaharty. And so is poor Nick Brocco—or will be, pretty soon. Yeh, fill her up again and I'll start at the beginning and tell yuh everything—but of course you'll keep it under your hat. That's a promise, isn't it? . . ."

IT STARTED up at Jack Martin's. You know his office in the old Garden Tower? It was the day after Frankie stopped Young Jackson in the sixth. We was down to get paid off and just as Jack was handing us our check, in walks Lou Meyers, the Battler's manager. You know him. Always dressed fit to kill and stinking of perfume like a drug store.

"Well," says Jack, chewing on the long stogy that he's always dry smoking, "you're just the fellow I wanted to see, Lou. How about signing up your boy to meet Flaharty?"

"Suits me," says Lou. "We ain't afraid of him."

"How about it?" says Jack to me.

"Suits me, too," I says. "How about it, Frankie?"

He shook his head and smiled. "Nope," he says. "Nick and I ain't never goin' to fight. That's final."

"Afraid?" sneers Martin.

"You know damned well I ain't afraid," Frankie says. "But Nick and me is friends—and we're goin' to stay that way. I'll fight anyone else in the world—but not Nick."

"Nick feels the same way 'bout it," chirps Lou. "I've tried to talk him into it, but he says nothin' doin'."

"Get me the champion, Mister Martin, I'll fight *him*," says Frankie, "but not Nick." At that he thanks Martin for the check and walks out.

I stay. I was after a match with the champ—and so was Meyers. I claimed Frankie was entitled to the go and Lou was claiming that the Battler had a better record. Well, we had it hot and heavy for a while, and Martin just sat back and chewed that long stogy of his, and let us talk.

"I tell you, boys," he said finally, "you're just wasting time. There's only one fight that I'm goin' to sign and that's between Battling Brocco and Fighting Frankie Flaharty. It's a natural. The winner of that fight'll be the next champion. Stedman's having hard time to make the weight now. In another six months he'll have to saw off a leg to make the lightweight limit. Either the Battler or Flaharty can take him like Grant took Richmond—but they've got to fight each other first. So long as they dodge each other the champ has a good excuse for dodging both of 'em. But let them fight and the one that wins is the logical

contender and then the champ can't stall no longer."

"I know what you say is O. K.," says Lou, "but they won't fight. I'm willing enough to sign articles; so is Pete, here, but——"

"How about it, Mack?" asks Martin. "Are you willin' to sign?"

"Sure, if you get the boys to agree," I says, "but you heard Frankie, and Nick is just as bullheaded."

"Business is business," snaps Martin. "Look at the house they would draw. One's wop and the other's Irish. And they're both sweet fighters—never been licked—the best of their class. I want that match for my new Coliseum. Say, those boys'll pack 'em in to the rafters. They've got to fight, that's all."

"I agree with you," says Meyers, "but they won't—and that's that."

"Why?" asks Martin.

"Frankie gave you the straight dope," I interrupts. "They're friends. Went to the same public school together. Always ran together. Once Nick fell in the East river and Frankie pulled him out."

"I think they're scared of each other, if you ask me," sneers Martin.

"Maybe you're right, at that," says Lou. "Nick told me onct they had a fist fight when they was kids. He was leader of the Italian gang and Flaharty was boss of the micks across Varick Street. He said they had an awful fight—bare fists—lasted nearly an hour till a cop came. May-be——"

"Ah, they're not scared," I says. "It's friendship—nothing else."

"Well friendship don't pay no dividends in the fight game," says Martin. "These boys'll draw a \$200,000 house and if they're too sentimental to have good sense it's up to us to arrange things for their best interests—and ours, too, for I guess we'd all like a cut out of the gate receipts."

"I guess we would," says Lou. "Shoot! How you goin' to work it?"

"Didn't you ever hear of a *grudge* fight?" asks Martin. "Well, we'll stage one, and it'll be on the level, too."

"No chance," says Lou. "I wish there was, but there ain't."

Martin grins and his eyes look like a hungry wolf's.

"Say," he says, "do you fellows call yourselves managers? Why, you're as sap-

headed as those two pugs of yours. Use your brains. Ain't there any women down on Varick Street?"

"Nick is married," says Lou.

"So much the better," snaps Martin. "Give me a month's time and a little co-operation and you'll have to hold those guys apart, they'll be so anxious to get at each other's throats. So Brocco's married, eh? Well, then he'll be—no, they'll both be the fall guys and we'll lay back and watch the sport and collect our share out of that \$200,000 purse."

"Count me out," I says.

Yeh, Kid, so help me God! That's what I said and I wish I'd stuck to it. Yeh, fill her up again. And keep it filled. This gin don't seem to touch me tonight. I could drink a gallon of it. Maybe I will—enough to forget. What time is it? Only ten twenty, eh? Forty minutes more. *That's* what's keeping me sober.

Poor Nick. He was game and he didn't hold it against me. But I ought to be up there in the Death House instead of him. Yes, me and Martin and Meyers. But we didn't mean to. Leastwise, I didn't. And they won't give the poor Battler a chance. He'll take the long count with his hands tied. That was what was worrying him. That and—thanks! Where was I? Maybe it will ease my mind. I hope so.

WHEN Martin made that crack about his wife I says, "Count me out," and I meant it, Kid, I meant it. You see I knew her. She was Annie Riordan. Yeh, Irish. Funny, isn't it, marrying a wop, but Nick was white all the way through and a swell looker besides. Frankie liked her, too; always had. I'm not so sure he wasn't stuck on her himself onct. I think he was—and she liked him, too. But somehow she fell for Nick and they was married after he won his first big fight. But Frankie used to be up at Brocco's flat a lot—when Nick was there, of course—and we was all good friends. All except Lou Meyers. He was just Nick's manager and nothing more, but I was a friend to both the boys, and Annie, too, because we'd all grown up around Ninth Avenue and Houston Street together. That's what makes it worse. But money makes suckers out of all of us, don't it? And when you get it—*that* way—it never does you no good. But you never think of that

till afterwards. *Brrr!* Wait till I get my coat. It's cold, I tell you. And this damned gin hasn't any kick.

Well, I did holler, Kid, and if Lou had backed me up there wouldn't have been no trouble, but he was keen for it after the plan was explained and that damned Martin kept after me—arguing one minute, laughing and sneering the next—till I give in. It was his laughing that did it. Somehow I was kind of ashamed to have him think I was soft, and, besides, he kept explaining that it would be for the boys' own good.

"There can't be *two* champions, can they?" he would say. "Well, either they has got to be two champions or else neither of these boys will ever be champion. Come on, you fellows, we'll get them together and let the best man win. You both say you've got the best boy. You say they fought a draw once, bare fisted. Well, let them fight it out on the level and the winner'll be the next champion. And after it's all over we can explain things to them. The loser's end'll be close to fifty grand. I guess *that'll* patch up any hard feelings."

Well, I finally give in, Kid. And I'll admit it wasn't the loser's end I was figuring on, either. I knew Brocco was a sweet scrapper, but Frankie was going great guns then and I was willin' to bet a few grand on the side that he could take the Battler—and then I'd have the next champ, for it was a cinch either of them could lick Stedman. After all, I was Frankie's manager, and it was up to me to make him champion if I could. And Martin said they'd laugh about it themselves when the fight was over. Promised he'd give us all a supper and a swell blowout and tell the boys himself. Oh, he was slick, I tell you, and he kept after me till he had his way and I'd passed my word to play the game with them.

THEN Martin unlocked his cupboard and pulled out a bottle of real Scotch and lit that long stogy of his—it was the first and last time I ever saw him do anything but dry smoke—and we sat around the table and began to figure things out.

"Hasn't the Battler got a fight on out West?" asks Martin.

"Yeh," says Lou. "We fight Johnnie Tyson at Milwaukee three weeks from today."

"Fine," says Jack. "He'll stop Tyson hands down, unless he slips and breaks a leg or something. Pete and me'll be busy in the meantime and when the Battler gets back from Beer Town I'll guarantee that he'll be ready to sign articles to fight Flaharty—and Frankie won't hang back very long, neither."

"How you goin' to work it?" asks Lou, and believe me, I was wonderin', too.

"It's easy when you know human nature," grins Martin, helping himself to another drink—like I'm goin' to do now. "It's easy, boys. All you need is a little imagination."

"Spill your scheme," says Lou.

"You say Brocco's married," says Martin, "and that Flaharty knows the girl?"

We both nodded.

"Well," Jack goes on, "while the Battler is out West training for his mill with Tyson, we'll slip him the info that friend Flaharty is stepping out with his wife—or hanging around the flat, anyway."

"But—" I begins.

"Oh, I know that Sunday school boy of yours wouldn't actually beat the Battler's time," sneers Martin. "That won't be necessary. We'll just pass the word to the Battler that he *has*. You, Pete, can write a letter to Lou, kind of dropping word of it careless-like, or pretending that you're worried. And you, Lou, can drop the letter where you'll be sure that the Battler finds it. That's all that'll be necessary. I know human nature, I tell you. Jealousy will do the rest."

"But Frankie and Annie are good friends," I cuts in, "and——"

"And that makes it so much easier," laughs Jack. "They're both Irish, too, aren't they? And Brocco's Italian? Well, what more do you want? Blood's thicker than water, boys, and I never saw a fighter yet that wasn't jealous as hell."

"I tell you, all we've got to do is to plant suspicion in Brocco's mind and——"

"And Annie'll explain everything five minutes after he's back," I says.

"I hope she tries to," says Jack. "The more she explains the more suspicious he'll be. And, to make it a copper-riveted cinch, we'll have Pete here drop up to the Brocco flat and plant a pair of gloves or better still, a handkerchief with Frankie's initials on it, someplace where she won't see it, but where the Battler's sure to find it. How'll

she explain that? She'll tell the truth, of course, but the Battler'll only think she's lying and hell will break loose—you wait and see.

"Nick will cut loose and tell what he thinks of Flaharty and I guess we've got some more kind friends who'll see that Frankie hears what's said. No, fellows, inside a month they'll be ready to choke each other at sight and when one of them signs articles and issues a challenge, you can bet your bottom dollar that the other fellow'll be down here half an hour after he reads about it in the papers—and I guess I can attend to that end of it. After Flaharty has signed up, too, I'll tip off the newspaper boys about that fist fight you say they had—that'll be great stuff. We'll play it up for a grudge fight and every Irishman and every Italian in New York'll be fighting to get in the arena. We'll have to have the police reserves ready, but it'll be a sell-out, I tell you."

"Fine!" says Lou Meyers. "You've got a head-piece on you, Jack. Nick is jealous as hell. Oh, it'll work! It'll work, all right."

"It's likely to work too damn' well," I says. "Maybe one of us will lose a fighter. And I don't want to be around when they find out."

"Oh, there's no danger of that," says Martin. "They can sign articles separately and we can keep them apart. You, Pete, train over in Long Island and Lou can take the Battler over in New Jersey or up-State somewhere. We can fix it so they won't meet till they weigh in, and they'll be so sore then they won't say anything—or if they do start anything we can pull them apart. It'll only be that much more good publicity."

"I was thinking of Annie," I says, "she's a——"

"Probably it will be a tough week or two for the girl," says Jack, "but after it's all over she'll laugh about it, too. Suppose Nick is grouchy for a few days? She'll forget it when she sees his bank balance after the fight, and, just to square things, I'll promise to buy the little lady a squirrel skin coat myself. How'll that be?"

Well, Meyers was all hopped up over the idea and I had passed my word. But I didn't like it, Kid, I didn't like it. Somehow it seemed kind of a scaley trick, and even then I had a sort of hunch—somethin'

warned me—I was afraid— Oh, damn this gin, Kid! It's like cold water. Haven't you got any liquor with a real kick to it? And what time is it? God! Half an hour yet. Get me a real drink, then—and can't you get up some heat? It's cold, Kid, and I've been chilled—ever since this afternoon—there in the—in the Death House. Somehow it was like a morgue. You know what I mean?

Thanks! That's a little more like the old stuff. Half an hour more. God! It'll be hard on the Battler. He's got no chance and he knows it. His last fight—and he'll never even leave his corner. He'll get the old K. O. strapped in a chair. He won't be able to fight back.

Yes, give me another shot. Don't be worried. I can't get drunk. Wish I could. Where was I? Oh, yes. Martin had lined out his scheme; Lou Meyers had agreed—and—and I guess I didn't make much of a holler.

WELL, to make a long story short, we framed it up like that skunk of a Martin suggested and the Battler and Frankie both fell for it. I wrote the letter—I wish I had cut my hand off first—and Lou let it drop where Nick would find it. Funny, isn't it, how you can plant one little lie in a man's mind and pretty soon it poisons him—and everyone around him.

God! If I'd only have known. But it seemed like kind of a game at first, and I was thinking of Frankie. I liked him. I wanted him to be champ. I liked Nick and Annie, too; they were friends o' mine, and trusted me, but it all seemed like a game. And the way Martin explained things it looked like we was doin' them all a good turn. Sometimes I wonder whether I was thinking of them, or thinking of my cut out of the purse. It's all mixed up, Kid. When yuh tell one lie you've always got to tell another, and when you start a thing like that yuh never know where it'll end. No, yuh never know.

Well, it worked like Martin said it would—the dirty skunk! Nick got boiling mad when he got hold of the letter I wrote, Lou had all he could do to stop him from hopping the first rattler back to New York and cutting Frankie's heart out. That was what I was leary of all the time. But he didn't. Lou kind of calmed him down and the Bat-

tlar took it out on Johnnie Tyson. He stopped him in a round and then they came back to New York.

I had Frankie up at Buffalo—he was matched with Kid Marks—and so Nick never bumped into him. But I had planted a monogrammed handkerchief of his in the Battler's bureau drawer—and he found that.

I guess there was hell to pay all right when Nick taxed Annie with what was in his mind. She was Irish, you know, and had a temper with the best of them. Yes, I sure guess it was hell all right. It must have been—knowing them both.

But it worked all right—it worked. At first Nick was for taking a gat and bumping Frankie off. But Lou suggested the quickest way he could get revenge was to knock his head off in the ring, show him up, and then, he said, Annie wouldn't have any use for him. And besides, when Lou found how hard he was taking it, he kept telling Nick that probably things wasn't as bad as he thought.

Well, one day Nick went down to Jack Martin's and signed articles. He blew off his face about what a bum Frankie was, how he could trim him easy, and all the rest. Of course Jack saw that the newspapers spread it big.

Me and Frankie was up at Buffalo. I'll never forget Frankie's face when he seen those headlines. Honest, you'd have thought his mother had died. He didn't say anything for a while—just sat there staring at the paper.

"Well, the dirty bum is trying to cross you," I says finally. "He figures that if you don't fight him Jack Martin'll give him the match with the champion."

"Yeh, it looks that way, all right," Frankie says. "It sure looks that way, Pete. But I'd never have thought it of Nick. Something must be wrong. I'll bet if I could only see him that—"

"The next time you see him, Frankie, it's goin' to be across a twenty-foot ring," I snaps. "Do you suppose I'm goin' to let that stiff of a Lou Meyers euchre me out of a match with the champ. Not on your life, Frankie. We'll call Nick's bluff and then we'll see who fights the champ—you or Nick."

Frankie takes it hard, but finally he agrees. I leave him up at Buffalo and I go down and sign articles. And of course

when I sign I say a few things about what a bum Nick is. And the papers print it as coming from Frankie. There's a big splurge in all the sporting pages, of course, and as the fight don't need to be talked up much—it sure was a natural, like Martin says—Jack signs them on for his first match in the new Coliseum and the fight is only a month away.

Nick trains over in Jersey somewhere and I keep Frankie right up at Buffalo till a week before the match. We didn't want them to get together, and the further away they was until they climbed into the ring the better it pleased me and Lou and Jack Martin.

FRANKIE trained hard—you can bet I saw to that—but all the same he was worrying about this break with Nick, worrying and wondering. If he'd known what was wrong he could have stood it, but he couldn't get it through his head why Nick had turned so suddenly and he kept broodin' over it till I got kind of worried myself. You know a man can't train right when something's on his mind.

And all the while reports kept coming to me that the Battler was so savage that they almost had to make him wear a muzzle to keep from biting his sparring partners. He wasn't worrying. He *knew* what it was about—or thought he knew—and in a way that give him a kind of advantage. The betting odds was shifting in favor of Nick, too, when they should have been even money, and I begins to feel that I was too foxy for my own good. I tell you, Kid, more than once I had half a mind to tell Frankie what we framed up and then go down to New York and come clean with Nick, even though I knew he'd probably knock my block off when I told him—if Frankie didn't do it first.

It wasn't that that kept me from doin' it, Kid—so help me God it wasn't that. But I was afraid that if these boys of ours found out they'd run out on us and leave us holding the sack. So I kept my trap shut, but I tell you I was worried, too, for Frankie's sake.

Me and Frankie had to come down to New York a week before the fight so's we could finish our training where the newspaper boys could see us. But I watched Frankie like a hawk and he didn't have no chance to see Annie, even if he had wanted

to. And of course he didn't run across Nick, because he was still over in Jersey—and you can bet Lou was watching him.

Of course they had to meet the afternoon of the fight, when they weighed in at the commissioner's office, and I guess Lou and me was both on pins and needles. I know I was. I was mighty glad that they had to go into that room together stripped, for I was half afraid that Nick might have a stiletto on him.

Well, they met all right, and it wasn't pretty to see. Nick was standing by the scales when I came in with Frankie. For a moment the Battler looked at Frankie and his eyes was like rattlesnakes. Then he sneered.

"I guess you know what I'm going to do to you tonight?" says Nick.

"You're going to try to lick me, I suppose," says Frankie, "but you've got a fat chance."

"I'm going to kill you," yells Nick. You could hear him in the outside room. "I'm going to kill you, yuh yellow skunk! And I guess you know why."

Nick's face was twisting and Lou and a couple of newspaper boys grabbed him. For a second it looked as if they'd be a battle right there, but finally they hustled him away and then Frankie weighed in.

Still, Frankie never had tumbled, and while I knew he wasn't scared of Nick—or scared of being killed either—I could see he was worrying, wondering, asking himself what was wrong. He was asking me, too, and I had to lie to him and give him every reason but the right one. Mostly I told him that I guessed Nick and Lou simply had decided to go out for the money and that Nick had been trying to get his goat.

"No, it ain't that," Frankie would say. "It ain't that. There's something else—there's something back of this."

By this time I was leary, not that Nick'd kill him—that was all bull—but Frankie was brooding so that I knew he couldn't do himself justice. Once more I came damn near telling him everything. God! How I wish I had. But I didn't—I didn't—Finally, after he'd thrown a big feed in him, I gets him to lie down in his room up at the San Loraine hotel, where we was parking till after the fight.

"Go to sleep, Frankie," I says. "It'll come out all right in the wash. Probably

somebody told him you said something about him or something like that. Probably you'll be good friends after the fight's over. But right now you take a nap and stop worrying."

Well, he promised he would, so I left him lying on the bed and went outside to walk up and down the hall and have a smoke. Believe me, I wasn't feeling any too brash myself. Win or lose I had about decided to take a knockout drop after the fight and let Jack Martin do the explaining. It was up to him, anyhow.

FRANKIE didn't go to sleep like he promised. Instead he kept tossing around and wondering why Nick had said what he did and why he had acted and looked so vicious. Finally Frankie got a hunch and took down the phone by the bed and called up Annie—yes, Nick's wife. Of course I never knew nothing about this till afterwards. But it seems he just couldn't go on worrying over what it was all about and he figured Annie would give him the straight dope. Anyway, he calls up the apartment.

She answers all right. We found out this afterwards, too. She answers, and when she hears his voice she calls "Frankie!" like that, out loud, as if she was kind of glad to hear him.

"Yes, it's Frankie," he says.

"Oh, I'm glad you called," she cries out, and then suddenly the phone rings off like she slammed down the receiver and all he can hear is a buzzing and a buzzing.

At first he figured he was cut off by the operator, but when he tries to get the number again the operator tells him there's nothing doing and finally he gives it up. He's more puzzled than ever, and hurt, too, because now he figures Annie was just razzing him, and he can't make out what it's all about. So he puts his mind on the fight and by this time he's ready to meet Nick halfway at any killing game the Battler wants to start—in the ring or out of it. Frankie figures Nick has turned Annie against him and that was the last straw.

Fill her up again. God, Kid! Can't you see it ain't touching me? It feels more like cold water than liquor. I'll cut it short. There isn't much time left before—before—you know what I mean. It seems I've got to talk now—to tell someone—but afterwards—afterwards I guess

I'll follow Frankie—or maybe Nick—or—Don't take that bottle away! Don't, damn you! I can drink it all and never stutter. All right, fill her up again and I'll tell you the rest of it. Give me the time first. Ten minutes more, eh? Yeh, I'm comin' to the fight.

God! What a fight it was! There never was another fight like it. There'll never be another. The pictures would've made a million dollars if the damned censors hadn't stopped them. No, I know. The papers never said much about the fight itself. They was too full of—of the other. Oh, I'll tell you about it, all right. I can see it now—blow for blow. The greatest fight there ever was—everybody that saw it said so—and Frankie was licking him, I tell you; he was licking him proper and he'd have won if—if . . . Well, just one more jolt, Kid, and I'll tell it to yuh. Honest, just one more . . . Thanks!

WE WAS called into the ring early. The prelims was all short and sweet. I never saw such a crowd. Jack Martin was right. All the wops and micks in town was there and it needed the police reserves to keep 'em apart. They was savage; savage, I tell you. They'd come to see blood—and they wasn't disappointed.

The Battler come in the ring first, but he never sat down in his corner. Lou had him by the arm and was talking to him, soft and soothing, but Nick was grinding his teeth, and he shook off Lou's hand and commenced to pace back and forth in his corner like a—like a tiger in a cage. I could see him as we was coming down the aisle.

When Frankie climbed between the ropes the Battler gave a kind of growl—I tell you I could hear through the cheering—and he looked so shiny that I thought he must have greased himself. I was just going over to see—but when I took another look I could tell he was sweating. Yes sir, he was sweating like a horse sweats when it is scared—or getting ready to kill you. He was breathing hard, too, and his eyes was glittering like diamonds. His hands was clenching and unclenching an' there was blood on his lips where he'd bit them.

I tell yuh, Kid, he give me the creeps and I steps in front of Frankie so *he* won't see him. Nobody ever got Frankie's goat

—before that night—but you could see plain murder all over the Battler—so help me, you could *smell* it. Oh, I know, they say a man can't fight when he's mad an' excited, but Nick was plain looney and no one wants to fight a crazy man. And remember him and Frankie had been friends.

Lou Meyers came shuffling across the ring to where I was.

"Get this fight started quick," he whispers, "or there won't be any fight—not for the money anyway. I can't hold my boy much longer."

I took one more look at the Battler. "Suits me," I says, and we grabs Jack Martin and tells him to cut the long-winded introductions.

Of course I goes over to see the gloves put on the Battler and Lou was in Frankie's corner to see we weren't hiding any horse-shoes or brass knuckles.

I feels Nick's bandages and it give me a start when I touches his hand. He was sweating—the sweat was rolling off him—but he was cold—stone cold. And his eyes—say, Kid, I felt like I'd seen a ghost, or was going to see one. I was sweating now, and shivering, too, and I tell you, Kid, I swear I could hear a ringing in my ears like the keening of those old Irish women at the wakes down in Hell's Kitchen.

My knees turned to water and I knew it was a sad day for Peter Mack and Frankie Flaharty. I'd have given all the purse, and more, if me and Frankie'd been safe out of those ropes. But the crowd was baying like bloodhounds. What chance was there to stop it then? They'd have torn us to pieces. Somehow I found myself back in Frankie's corner, though what I was saying to him I don't know.

Then someone pushed me out of the ring; a sudden silence fell; the gong sounded; and Nick Brocco, snarling like an animal, came charging from his corner as if he was shot out of a gun.

Frankie sidesteps like a dancing master, but the Battler wheels like a rushing boar and lands a long, glancing left that almost tore Frankie's ear off. Frankie jumps in with a right to the body—it sounded like someone had hit a bass drum—but Nick only grunts and starts chasing Frankie down the ropes, slugging like a drunken longshoreman at a picnic.

Frankie wasn't rattled, he was grinning and his eyes were as cold as ice. He was

blocking, ducking, slipping, fast as chain lightning, and you know how he can box, but it was like trying to box a cyclone. Nick penned him in a corner; I heard a crack; and there was my boy on the floor, his mouth dripping blood, and the fight hardly ten seconds old.

For a second I thought Brocco was going to jump on top of him and I was jest gettin' ready to yell "Foul!" when the referee steps between them. Lucky the referee was big—it was Jack Meehan—but for all his beef he could hardly shove back the Battler. Nick was snarling and panting and it looked like he was going to soak Jack.

Frankie sees his chance, jumps to his feet, twists behind Meehan, and slides out in the center of the ring, with the Battler piling into him, both fists flying, grunting like a woodchopper with every blow.

KID, I never saw such punching. His arms was goin' like twin trip-hammers and they went through Frankie's guard as easy as a clown goes through a paper hoop. Frankie was cool—he was still smiling—but his face was covered with blood and his head was rocking like a cradle. Once he sidestepped so that Brocco went spinning on his head, but he bounded back like a rubber ball and his next punch sent Frankie staggering to the ropes. Then Nick was on him like a tiger.

Frankie rattled the Battler's teeth with a right uppercut, but the next second a sizzling left hook set him on his haunches and once more that crazy Italian was clawing at big Jack Meehan and trying to get at him. Frankie took the count this time—but he was a long ways from out—and when Brocco came tearing in with a wild swing Frankie ducks clear under it and is out in the center again, and he had a couple of seconds more to clear his head, 'cause Brocco almost went through the ropes.

He comes rushing back, snarling and showing his teeth like a terrier after a rat and I know I was groaning as Frankie ducked and dodged and danced away with the punches raining 'round him thick as hailstones. Frankie was the best boxer in the world—you know that, Kid—but it was *biff! bam! zip! bang!* and in ten seconds more he was back in his own corner—and on the floor again.

Nick'd have had him then if he'd kept his head, but he was seeing red. He missed a swing by two feet as Frankie staggered to his feet and before the Battler could untangle himself from the ropes my boy was in the clear again. But there was no let up. Nick was rushing, rushing, rushing and you couldn't count his blows. You couldn't see them, they was coming so fast. Frankie was straight-lefting him, and side-stepping around to Nick's right eye, which was half closed already, and Nick must have slowed some, for nobody could keep up the pace he'd set. But for all o' that he was bouncing enough punches off Frankie to stop a heavyweight and Frankie was wobbling along the ropes when the gong rang and he'd have been down in a second more.

The gong didn't mean anything to Nick, but Big Jack stepped between 'em and me and Lou with a coupla of seconds pried 'em apart and dragged them to their corners.

The crowd was crazy—just plain, plumb crazy. Did yuh ever hear a cyclone? I tell yuh it sounded like the roar of a cyclone and the building was shaking—yes, shaking. I could see the shadows moving on the ring floor as the arc lights swayed. And there was something about that roar that brought blood to your eyes and made you want to grab a knife and start cutting throats. I know I was half crazy myself, for I had a bottle of brandy and a bottle of smelling salts, and I was just going to pour the smelling salts into Frankie when Harry Stegor—the trainer—caught my hand.

It looked to me like Frankie was done for, but when half a gill of brandy trickled down his throat he opened his eyes.

"I'm all right," he said. "I'm all right."

"Stand him off," I yells in his ear. "Brocco can't keep up that pace. Stand him off."

"I'll stand him on his head," Frankie mutters and the next second the gong goes again and Brocco was charging across the ring like a bulldog almost before we could get Frankie off his stool.

Frankie spreads his legs like he was going to side-step, then shifts and ducks and swings his left into Brocco's belly so hard that his fist went out of sight and honest to God I thought he had broken Nick's backbone.

Down goes Nick like he was shot. He'd

been hit square on the plexus with one of the hardest punches I ever saw delivered. By rights he ought to have been paralyzed—he was gasping like a fish out of water and his face was horrible—but inside of two seconds he climbed—no, jumped—to his feet, maced Frankie with a left and rushed him back along the ropes to Nick's own corner.

Then Frankie nailed Brocco with a straight right to the jaw and down he went again, flat on his back, and I thought the fight was over, for I stuck my head through the ropes and yelled like an Indian.

But the Battler was up before Big Jack could start the count and he tore into Frankie like a wild man. But for all his crazy strength, those last two punches had taken most of the steam out of Brocco and he was as groggy as Frankie. They both was reeling and dazed, out on their feet, and it looked to me like the first one down would stay down.

I guess it looked that way to Lou Meyers, too. They was still blazing away in the Battler's corner, right over where Lou was crouching by the ropes, and in a sudden lull of silence he lets out a yell to encourage Brocco.

"Remember Annie, Nick! Remember Annie," he hollers so's you could hear him in the galleries.

Nick gives a groan like a dying horse—that's the only way you could describe it—his whole body slumps and from where I was crouching I could see the fire go out of his eyes and his face turn pasty. He was shaking, shuddering, his whole body twitching. Maybe it was that punch to the plexus taking effect. That's what I thought then. Now I think different.

They was still rippin', tearin' and slug-gin' along the ropes, but now it was Brocco who was goin' backwards and the blood was flying at every punch.

Frankie had him out on his feet, rockin' and reelin', his head sagging, his eyes showing he'd gone cuckoo, and just as the gong rang the Battler flops in his own corner and Lou and his seconds dragged him onto his stool, slumped over like an empty sack till the smelling salts brought his eyes open.

God! Yuh ought to have heard the crowd *then!* It was like a cyclone and Niagara Falls and a couple o' dozen boiler factories all rolled into one. Hats and cushions and programs was coming down

from the galleries and wherever an Irishman and an Eyetalian was sitting together a policeman was prying them apart.

I WAS bending over Frankie, giving him the smelling salts, too, and rubbing the back of his head with ice, waiting for the gong—one way or another I knew it would be the last one—hardly able to hear myself think, when suddenly that noise stopped like someone had turned off a faucet. For a second the silence almost hurt your ears and then I heard a *tramp, tramp, tramp*, like the sound of marching feet and there was a rustling like a wind in the forest as those fifteen thousand persons came to their feet.

I straightens up and slews my head around and there, coming up the main aisle leading to the ringside, was a line of cops—there must have been fifty of them—led by a big lieutenant. They was marching straight to the ring and I stood open mouthed watching them and wondering, like everyone else was doing.

Right to the ring they came and in five seconds they had it surrounded and the big lieutenant skips between the ropes and the next second he is bending over Nick Brocco, there is a flash of steel, and when the big cop straightens up we see the Battler is handcuffed.

You'd have thought there'd have been a roar, but everyone was too paralyzed to think—including me. Everyone except Jack Martin. He was in the ring in a second and had the big lieutenant by the arm. His face—Jack's I mean—was red as a beet and you could tell by his lips he was swearing.

The cop leaned over and whispered in his ear and I saw Jack turn pale and his knees wobbled till he grabbed a rope.

But the crowd was muttering now—they would be roaring in a minute—and I see

the big cop whisper in Jack's ear again and Jack beckons to Harry Hall, the announcer.

He came puffing through the ropes, holding his megaphone, and the cop says something to him. Harry turns as white as Jack and his mouth is open.

Then the cop says something fierce like he's laying down the law and Harry sticks his megaphone to his mouth. You could have heard a pin drop.

"Ladies and Gentlemen:" Harry roars—you know what a voice he has. "Ladies and Gentlemen: The management request me to make this announcement. Upon order of the police department this fight is stopped because—because (he repeated his words) Battling Nick Brocco has just been put under arrest on information charging him with the murder of his wife. All bets are off. Please leave your seats quietly."

They left their seats—but not quietly. Well, I guess you read about the rumpus in the papers. They had sent plenty of cops and they got Nick out all right. At that, the crowd wasn't trying to mob Nick. They was battling the cops because the fight was stopped.

Some of them say the cops should have let the fight go on and arrested Nick afterwards. I don't know the law of it. But trust a cop to horn in to the limelight and make himself important whenever he gets a chance. Me? I don't think it made no difference. Frankie would have stopped him anyway in another minute. And that's God's truth.

Fill her up again. Yeh, I've talked all the booze out of me. I could drink the rest of the bottle now. And I will. I'm still cold, Kid. And you'll drink with me. Yes, you will. You'll drink to the hea—you'll drink to the memory of Nick Brocco. He's passed out now, Kid. That's why I kept talking. I didn't dare stop.

Concluding



The SECRET LAGOON

By BASIL CAREY

Preceding Events Briefly Retold

They found him dying, adrift without water in the open sea, and as the spark of life fled from him, the name of Traquair lingered in horror on his pale, young lips. Traquair! A name of fear wherever the Island schooners touch and men lust for power and gold. Among those who saw the unknown youth die was Carver, and he trembled, but not with fear, at hearing that name.

Straight to Waihiti Carver sailed after that. Traquair was at Waihiti, so it had been said. Carver had a score to settle with Traquair, one that was bitter and of years' duration. Now after long search he had located the man. Revenge would be no less sweet because of waiting.

McGinty, partner to Carver in their Island trading ventures, strove to dissuade him from this mad venture. But nothing could turn Carver aside until death had settled the balance between them. Once, years before, Traquair had thrust a treacherous knife in Carver's ribs, and had made off with the Dreaming God, a Chinese idol of gold, beautiful and beyond price. Not a thing a man might easily forget.

At Waihiti they find Traquair. The man is about to sail on his schooner, the *Amaranth*, with his partner Nicode. These two are a powerful pair, ruthless and strong, even though Nicode has not the will of Traquair. Carver and McGinty face them in the beach trading store. Little is said, but, in a second, the room is ablaze with flaming guns. The lamp is quenched, and Traquair and Nicode escape. They make for their vessel and elude Carver.

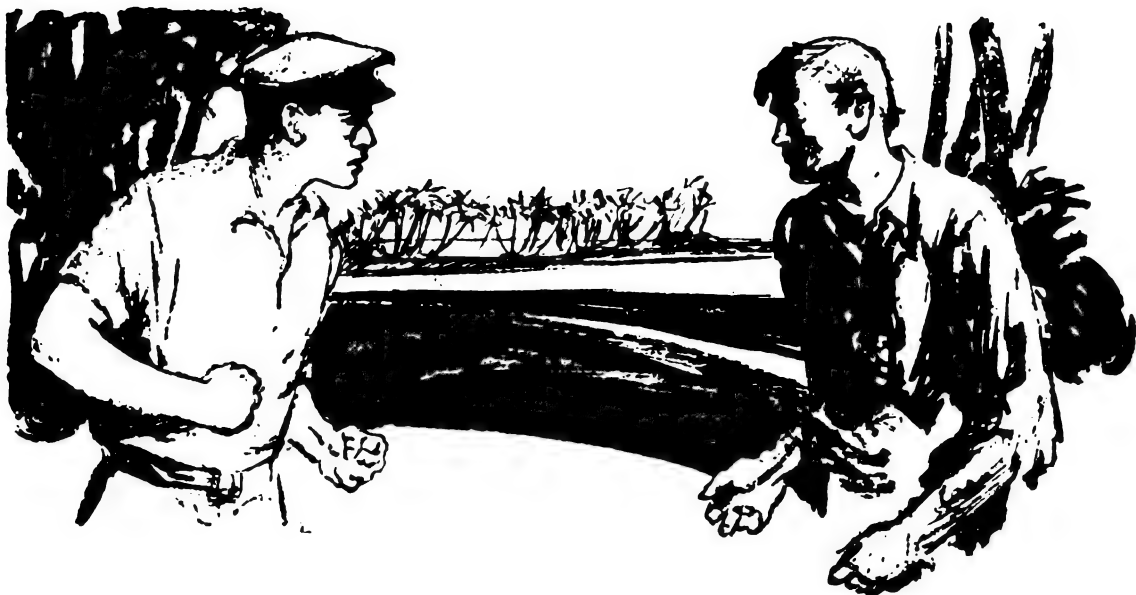
And behind them they leave Judith, daughter of Nicode, just blooming to womanhood, innocent, but wise in Island ways and endowed with the fighting spirit of her father. She defies Carver, when he tries to make her tell the destination of the *Amaranth*. She is not one from whom a secret is easily forced.

Carver forces the secret from a native. The *Amaranth* is bound for Parawa. Swiftly Carver and McGinty set sail in pursuit. And when they are well away, they find, stowaway in the hold of their *Nancy Q*, Judith, daughter of Nicode. She fights like a spitfire, but is helpless. It has been her intention to hide until the *Nancy Q* caught up with the *Amaranth*, and then to warn her father and Traquair, whom she half loves. Now that she has been discovered she knows not what to do.

All unsuspecting, the *Amaranth* reaches Parawa, and glides into the secret lagoon through the hidden passage where none may follow without knowing the way. There Poldhu awaits them, Poldhu whose business is the luring of ships to the cruel coral reefs by night, that he may loot their wrecked hulls. In the lagoon lay Poldhu's cutter, a fast, trim craft which had been so aptly named the *Wolf*.

Between Traquair and Poldhu is smoldering distrust and hatred, and their meeting is of ominous portent. Poldhu the silent, Traquair the sure.

Traquair demands the Dreaming God of Poldhu. Traquair had left it in his hands for safekeeping. Poldhu tells Traquair that Morton,



A Powerful Romance of The Dangerous Isles

another partner in the wrecking business, has decamped in his lugger, the *Seamew*, taking the golden idol with him.

Traquair is possessed with berserk fury. He sets out blindly in pursuit, heading for Flanders Island. Traquair gone, Poldhu returns to his hut, and there behind a secret panel is the Dreaming God.

On board the *Amaranth* the fires of hatred smolder. Nicode curses Poldhu for a traitor, says he has lied about Morton and the idol. Traquair silences him with a blow. But they find no trace of Morton on Flanders Island. Then Nicode's patience is at an end. He enrages Traquair by accusing him of complicity in Poldhu's deceit. They fight. But Nicode is no match for the other, and the battle over, Traquair leaves his lifeless body on the beach. A new fury drives him now, and this time towards Parawa and a reckoning with Poldhu.

Meantime tragedy has overtaken Carver and his party aboard the *Nancy Q.* A fire starts and soon sweeps the vessel. The Kanakas seize the only boat and flee, leaving Carver, McGinty and Judith to battle the flames. They are forced to seek refuge atop the mast. There they wait, above the burning decks, for rescue.

Irony sends Traquair to them. He takes the three castaways off the burned ship. But only Judith comes aboard the *Amaranth*. Carver and McGinty are set adrift in an open boat, left to the mercies of the tropic seas.

Carver, half dead, is frantic at the thought of Judith in the hands of his enemy. He has, de-

spite himself, come to love her. Now hunger assails them. And then one night a passing trader rescues them.

The *Amaranth*, with Judith aboard, comes to Parawa. Traquair has told a fanciful story to account for the absence of Carver and McGinty. But Judith learns the truth from a native. And from this same Kanaka she hears of the death of her father, Nicode. Wisely she bides her time to charge Traquair with his treachery.

And now on Parawa is played a game of wits. Traquair conceals from Poldhu his suspicions about Morton and the Dreaming God. He has a plan for revenge. And Poldhu plots anew against Traquair. For the time, Judith is safe.

Carver and McGinty buy a swift ship, the *Kestrel*, and again sail for the Secret Lagoon. This time Carver seeks not only the Dreaming God, but Judith as well. The *Kestrel* makes Parawa and Carver goes ashore on the far side of the island. He makes a perilous journey over the high rocks to the settlement on the hidden lagoon. He meets Judith and they plan to escape.

That night things come to a head between Traquair and Poldhu. They fight. A lamp is overturned and the hut is soon ablaze. Poldhu rushes through the flames, knocking Traquair aside. He carries the Dreaming God in his arms. Swiftly he gains the *Wolf* and the open sea. Traquair, the lust of the killer upon him, pursues in the *Amaranth*.

This is to be a final reckoning. The survivor will return to Parawa to claim Judith for himself.

CHAPTER XVI

THE WATCHERS OF PARAWA

FOR three weeks Morton slunk about, waiting for the beacon signal which should tell him to return to Parawa.

He grew sick of inaction and his Kanakas chafed at the delay. His stores were dwindling and the water cask was low. His round, vacuous face grew sharp with anxiety. It did not occur to him to disobey Poldhu and return to the island before he should see a fire on the headland. His obedience was his chief virtue. For the rest, his loose mouth and weak chin showed the manner of the man.

The *Seamew* was heavily built. On the twentieth day of hanging about, a squall came up from the southeast. It jostled her and bullied her and left her badly knocked about. Morton swore unimaginatively and held a council with himself in the stateroom. A little more weather like that and the *Seamew* would kiss the mermaids. Two of his boys were sick and the other four were morose and sullen. He decided that he had better make Waihiti, three days away, and refit there. It wouldn't hurt Poldhu to light his rotten bonfire every night for a couple of weeks. Yes, he would go up to Waihiti and stretch himself and feel the ground under his feet instead of the heaving planks. There would be a chance of getting those smashed bulkheads mended, and his Kanakas could go on the spree and get their spirits back.

So the *Seamew* ploughed up north through the long blue furrows and sighted Waihiti in the early morning of the fourth day. The Kanakas sang at their work and Morton heaved a sigh of anticipation. They cast anchor outside the lagoon and he and the boys piled into the longboat. As they shot through the surf into the quiet lagoon, Morton saw Hogan come out of his store, waving a welcoming hand. He shouted, although they were too far apart for the words to be understood. Morton waved back like a boy home from school. When the boat grated on the beach he leapt out and splashed ashore.

"Well, 'pon my soul," said Hogan. "Who'd have thought of seeing you? Come on up and have a drink. Where's Traquair? What have you got aboard?"

They strolled up the beach. Morton dug his feet into the sand.

"Blow me, but it's a bit of all right to stand without balancing," he said. "Three blasted weeks I've been hanging round. Been down to Kahina, I have, and then layin' off Parawa until me and the boys got the jimjams. Oh, I'll spin it all come presently. Gimme some whisky, Hogan, and take me out to choose a girl. 'S'truth, the Prodigal Son ain't got nothin' on me when it comes to tacklin' the fatted calf."

"Seen Traquair?"

"Seen him? Gawd, no. He's on Parawa, most likely. Poldhu reckoned he'd come back there. Poldhu's sick of him, see? Wants to chuck him. So he kidded him I'd lifted that bloomin' idol that they're both so keen on. Sent him up around Flanders Island after me. Guess he hoped Lefroy might settle the job for him. He said for me to wait until he signaled me to go back. I reckon he wants to keep up the joke with Traquair. He'll pick a quarrel with him, I suppose, and send him off with a flea in his ear."

"What's his idea, breaking with Traquair?"

They had reached the store and Hogan busied himself with glasses. Morton sat down and crossed his legs. His sea-weary eyes dwelt greedily on the well-stocked shelves and the shining counter. His ears, sick of the eternal slap of the waves against the ship, listened appreciatively to the sound of the wind among the trees.

"Why? I'll tell you. He wants that image. Ever seen it? Made of yellow gold and looks like it was alive. Who was Budder, anyway? 'Cos that's its name, I heard Poldhu say. You couldn't hire me to have the blamed thing as a gift. Gives me the creeps, with its shut eyes and its funny smile. But them two would cut each other's throats to get it. Poldhu, he ain't always been so hot-after it. Or else he's just been bidin' his time. Traquair didn't carry it with him aboard the *Amaranth*. Hell, no. It's worth a ransom. He left it on Parawa. And Poldhu got to starin' at it till he gave me a turn, he looked at it so strange. Yes, another spot, please. Say, where's that red-headed gal of Nicode's that used to be around?"

"Gone," said Hogan evasively. He was in no mind to be pumped by Morton. "Say, did you ever know a fellow called Carver?"

"Heard of him. I ain't never seen him that I know of. Why?"

"He was in here a while ago, that's all."

"Ain't he the chap that had the Dreaming God before Traquair stole it?"

"That's him."

"Is he after Traquair?"

"Yes."

"Then good luck to him," said Morton. "And you can bet your shirt he'll need God on his side. Hats off to anyone who's got the guts to be after Traquair! Tell you—" he leaned forward—"tell you what I think. If it ever come to a scrap between Traquair and Poldhu, I'd stake my last half-dollar on Traquair. He ain't so big, but he's—well, they say 'as sure as Traquair,' don't they? And Poldhu, he thinks the same as me. Yes, I'll swear he does. He don't show it, but he's scared of Traquair. He don't want to fight with him."

HOGAN rose and put on the new gramophone record. Morton listened as one entranced. When it had been played for the sixth time he insisted on hearing it again so that he might join in the chorus.

"Well, I don't know but what I'm gettin' a shade tired of it," Hogan confessed. "There ain't a bloomin' Kanaka on the island what don't know it from start to finish. You know what a one-idea'd lot they are. For a fortnight they've sung it all day and most of the night, high and low and medium, bass and treble and solo and duet. Last night I see 'em makin' a new dance to it. Well, all I can say is, I hope to Gawd they don't do that dance when the padre from Johnson Island comes over next week. Does he ever come down your way?"

"No," said Morton shortly.

"Do you ever get any missionaries in Parawa?"

"No. No one comes to Parawa except those that can't help it."

Hogan stared.

"What do you mean? Say, just what do Poldhu and Traquair do on Parawa? I've often wondered."

"Then don't wonder no more," said Morton with decision. "And don't ask me. Them that asks questions gets told some remarkable fine lies."

Hogan accepted the rebuke in silence. Reticence is respected in the Islands. A

timely diversion was caused by the entrance of Bill Parsons. He walked briskly, but relapsed into alarming decrepitude at sight of Morton.

"Howdy," he said in a hollow voice. "Well, you're lookin' fine. Ah, it's very well to have health and strength like you've got."

He sighed deeply.

"Since you was here last year, I've been pretty well dead," he went on. "Pretty night shot to bits, I've been . . . Thank you, yes, I will. Scotch, if it's all the same to you. To my mind the Irish don't touch the innards quite the same."

He drank deeply, unconscious of the wink with which Hogan favored Morton. Then he shifted his sleeve and displayed with pride the scar of his wound.

"I'll pay him back one day," he said darkly. "If he and Traquair had to fight, why couldn't they go outside? You wait, Carver, that's all."

"Carver, was it?" said Morton with interest. "When was this?"

"'Bout six weeks or more ago," Hogan told him. "Traquair was in a mighty hurry to get away, or he'd have stopped until he got Carver. But he was a day late sailing as it was. We got a shark come in the lagoon, and he must stop to get it. If he hadn't, Carver would just have missed him."

"Where was he off to in a such a hurry?" mused Morton. "Six weeks— Lemme see— He— Oh, yes, he didn't want to miss the *Prin*— Oh, yes, I see. Just a bit of business, that's all. Well, well, I hope you'll be yourself again soon, Bill."

With seeming casualness, he tightened the stopper in the whisky bottle. Seeing that no more was forthcoming, Bill Parsons shambled off, after a few desultory remarks. They watched him go down the path and Hogan laughed.

"Poor cuss, he was real bad. Carver's bullet got him pretty deep. Yes, we hiked it out and bandaged him up so well as we could. Made him damn bad though. Rotten constitution. He got feverish, too. I kept him well soaked with quinine. He's got no spirit. Made up his mind he was goin' to die, and had me learn him the catechism, so he could spout a bit when the padre come in. What? 'Course I got a prayer book. Think I'm a blasted

heathen? No, I didn't buy it. It came by mistake in a box of books ordered for old Burrows in Degas. He sent it back to me with the message that he didn't require savin'."

Morton chuckled.

"Well, did the padre come?"

"Yes. It was awful. Bill was very bad that day. Bit off his head, as you might say. When his reverence come in and sat down by him, Bill started right away sayin', 'Who gave you that name?' same as I used to say to him, tryin' to learn him, see? And then out it all come, all he'd got into his muddled head, the right words, but all topsy-turvy in the sense, and somehow there was a limerick got mixed in that kept comin' in bits, and he couldn't get the last line right. And at last he quit the catechism and sat up, swearin' he'd get the last line if he swung for it. Well, he did get it, and then he must say the whole thing complete, and me, I was blushin' 'cause it ain't what you'd call refined, and there was the padre right there. But, blow me, if his reverence didn't wait till the end and then he says, 'That don't scan right,' he says. 'Listen, this way's better.' And it was."

"Say it," demanded Morton. Hogan complied. After they had laughed Morton said, "Must be a sport, that padre."

"Whitest man in the Islands," said Hogan soberly. "Old Bill took a turn for the better after he'd gone. Felt kind of bucked up, see?"

"Where's Nicode?" asked Morton after a pause. "He was here when I come last year."

"He sailed with Traquair."

"Where is he now?"

"Dunno. With him still, I suppose. What made Poldhu think of Flanders Island?"

"Lefroy. I used to run with him, years ago. Poldhu kidded Traquair that I'd try to make Honolulu in the *Concepcion*."

"Well, Lefroy's due here next week, if you can wait so long," Hogan told him. "Once in six months he comes with a cargo of guano for the Degas boat."

Morton considered for a moment. This was the 4th of August. He knew that Poldhu had planned to get the *Sultan* on the night of the 8th. If by any chance Traquair should be gone before then, Poldhu would need help. He would light

the beacon and wait impatiently for Morton's return. If Morton set out on the 5th, he could just be back in time. But then, Traquair might still be in Parawa, in which case no bonfire would be lighted, and the journey would be wasted. It was six years since he had seen Lefroy. Damn it all, he wasn't a slave to Poldhu.

"All right, I'll wait," he said.

So three nights later when the *Wolf* fled out of Parawa with the *Amaranth* in hot pursuit, he sat peacefully in the store, swapping yarns with Hogan and Bill Parsons, while far to the south Poldhu's hunted eyes searched the darkness for the *Seamew's* lights in vain.

II

JUDITH and Carver ran forward. As their feet sank in the sand they could make out rushing figures that passed between the house and the dark lagoon. There came the grating of a catamaran's bottom on the beach, the splash of a paddle, the shouting of the boys as they pulled faster under Traquair's curses. Farther out they could hear an anchor drawn up. Around the house the Kanakas ran wildly, throwing ineffectual dollops of water at the blaze. Even when it became plain that the fire must burn itself out they still tore to and fro, screaming, to fill buckets and pots with sea water and empty them into the house.

Carver felt Judith trembling by his side.

"Don't be scared," he reassured her. "Did you hear an anchor chain? I'm going to see what's happened. Come on."

But Judith held him back.

"They're a savage lot," she said, "and you're a stranger. I think Poldhu's gone aboard the *Wolf*. She's farthest out and that chain sounded a good way off. If he's gone, Traquair will go too. You can't follow them."

The sound of a second anchor being hauled in struck on their ears.

"Well," said Carver, "they've got away. Quick, we must get a catamaran and follow them."

"You're a fool," said Judith. "Do you think you've got a dog's chance of getting aboard? The only chance we've got is to get on board the *Kestrel* when it gets light. We're stuck here for tonight. If you've got

any sense you won't go down among that yelling mob. The mood they're in, they'd as soon lynch you as look at you. We'd better keep here until the morning."

"I think we could make the top of the cliff. It's moonlight."

"No," said Judith firmly. "It's too risky. These slopes are full of rotten swamps. You must have noticed that when you came down."

She could not quiet him. He was furious with impatience and frustration. He looked very tall and menacing in the moonlight. She had a feeling of panic lest he should pick her up in his arms and stride away through the trees in his mad haste to reach the place where Kukeke waited with the longboat. Before her eyes rose pictures of the deadly swamps that spotted the slopes, still, evil patches where the red marsh flowers grew out of the ooze. She had once seen a goat sucked in. The memory still had power to make her shudder.

Carver was walking up and down with long strides. He did not speak, but she guessed at the anger which consumed him. His enemy had been within his reach and had escaped him. For the moment he forgot even Judith in the bitterness of thwarted hatred. His hands itched to be at Traquair's throat. Judith caught at his arm, but he shook her off.

In the moonlight they watched the *Wolf* and then the *Amaranth* slip out of the lagoon. On the beach the Kanakas grew less noisy. The persistence of the fire frightened them. A child, venturing too near, ran away screaming with a burnt arm. The men had stopped their impotent efforts to subdue the flames. They accepted the supremacy of the fire god and began a slow wailing chant. Soon they formed into a rough circle that moved with slow rhythmic steps round the blazing house.

With an effort, Carver mastered himself. He turned to Judith.

"We'll wait here till morning," he told her. "Then we'll go up to the top of the cliff and try to sight the *Kestrel*. Soon as we see her we'll climb down and see whether Kukeke's still alive. Oh, yes, he might quite easily die. I had to leave him there alone. You know as well as I do that there's nothing scares a Kanaka more than the dark. Poor devil! Well,

it couldn't be helped. Anyway, it's not all wasted. I've found you."

His anger was passing, held in check by the nearness and the sweetness of her in the dark. A wind blew up suddenly from the north, sweeping down the slopes until Judith shivered. He put his arms round her, drawing her to him, sheltering her as he had sheltered her in those long hours of peril aboard the derelict *Nancy Q*. He was racked with jealousy at the thought of the hours she must have spent alone with Traquair before they reached Parawa. And she had been in love with him then. Had anything—could anything have happened? He began to speak, choosing his words with the utmost care.

"Judith, it's not so long ago that Traquair meant something to you. Have you quite forgotten why you came aboard the *Nancy Q*? You see, I want to be awfully sure that you care for me."

"I hate him," said Judith in a hard voice. "He's a rotter all through. Tali says he killed my father. And you know about Luani. I've told you what he planned for Poldhu."

"But when you first went on the *Amaranth*," he persisted. "Did you—you didn't hate him then?"

"What are you getting at?" said Judith. For answer he raised her hand to his lips.

"I'm a jealous fool," he said, "and after all, your life's your own. I saw you asleep once at Hogan's. I think I fell in love with you then, although I'd have shouted if anyone had told me. And then we hated each other until the time on the mast. Do you remember? When the *Amaranth* came along and took you off and left McGinty and me in the longboat, I thought I'd go mad with jealousy thinking of you and Traquair together. We had a filthy time, and always I was seeing you with—him. I swore I'd pull through somehow. I wasn't going to die before I'd kissed you."

He paused.

"I've lived the way most men do. There are plenty of things in my life that needn't have happened. You know what men are—and you know what I mean. But love—I've never loved a woman with my soul before. I used to think men were fools when they said love changed the world. Well, I was the fool. They were right. I love you so much—I want you so much,

that nothing that's happened will make any difference. Nothing that you've ever done. Even if Traquair—even if you and Traquair——”

He stopped.

“It would matter,” came Judith's voice. “You can say what you like, but if I'd let Traquair—make love to me, it wouldn't be the same. My father used to say a man should marry with his eyes open and a woman with her eyes shut. Well, there's nothing to hide.”

His hands slid to her shoulders.

“You mean that?”

“Yes.”

After a pause he said, “Judith, did you ever know anyone called Corin?”

“There was a Captain Corin. He used to put into Waihiti sometimes. The *Melisanthe* was his boat. I haven't seen him for a long time. Why?”

“Did a lad called Hilton sail with him?”

“Yes. He used to sing up at Hogan's. Do you know him?”

“I did. I suppose Traquair did too?”

“Yes. Last time the *Melisanthe* was in, Traquair was in Waihiti. He sailed on the same day as Captain Corin. What's happened to young Hilton?”

“He's dead. We picked him up in an open boat. He died on Mowawi. Before he died he told me where to find Traquair.”

“Where was the *Melisanthe*?”

“Sunk. Traquair rammed her. How that kid escaped I don't know. What was Corin carrying?”

“He'd been pearling. I think he'd had a good haul. He wasn't a bit discreet. Are you sure about Traquair?”

“That lad was.”

She shrugged her shoulders.

“I believe it. I think there's very little that he'd stick at. You haven't lived in the same house with him. I have. He's worse than Poldhu. Poldhu doesn't care whom he hurts. Traquair does. He likes to see other people suffer. Oh, let's forget him until tomorrow.”

“Do you think you could sleep?”

She shook her head, but already he was on his knees, groping for soft dry leaves and wisps of fern to make her a pillow. She lay down and soon he heard the deep, regular breathing which tells of the sleeper.

FOR an hour he stood by her, leaning against the trunk of a palm whose branches seemed to pierce the stars. By degrees the noise round the smoldering house lessened. By midnight the flames had died and the Kanakas went back to their huts. In Carver was born a desire to explore the ruins. The moon held. He looked at Judith. She was sound asleep. Satisfied that the Kanakas were unlikely to venture out again, he stole through the trees and made his way to the soft, yielding sand. Once something crackled under his feet. He guessed that he must have trodden on the mound of sand that hid a bush hen's eggs. A vague shadowy splash moved away as he advanced. It was a robber crab, disturbed by his soft tread. From the vast, dim region of the trees came a hundred small inexplicable noises. Was it any wonder that the superstitious natives invested the island with legends? From the heart of the night came a low moaning. Now it sounded from the woods, now from the deep lagoon. Again, it was behind him, then far ahead. Impossible to explain it; impossible to ignore it.

He walked more quickly, and felt the sand slipping away under his feet. Once he stumbled and fell, then jerked himself up again and went on. The ruins of the house grew more plain. Soon he stood beneath the charred wall and felt it still hot under his hand. The four walls remained, but the roof had gone, and in the interior lay a mass of rubble from which ghostly wisps of smoke still struggled. He walked all round the house and found a little shed, strongly built, that stood apart within a stockade and had escaped the flames. He tried the door, but it was padlocked and bolted. There was no window. The thought crossed his mind that here he might find what he sought. Yet was it likely that either Poldhu or Traquair would leave the Dreaming God in danger? He had heard enough from Judith to guess at the savage rivalry of possession which burned within those two. Where had they gone, and had they gone as friends or enemies? What sudden quarrel had inflamed them that they should up-anchor and away all in a breath? It is fear that sends a man racing through the night. Which of them was afraid and why?

He knew the *Amaranth* for a swift boat.

Had he and McGinty a chance in a thousand? Even if he and Judith got board the *Kestrel* early in the morning, there yet remained the uncertainty of their enemy's direction. Naturally there would be no shadow of a sail upon the horizon. It seemed hopeless. He and McGinty might head south and cruise about for days in hopes of picking up news. And all the time Traquair might be in Tahiti, waiting for a 'Frisco boat to take him east. Or the *Kestrel* might strike up north and leave Traquair somewhere far to the west.

Then he remembered Judith.

She had said enough to show him that both men had coveted her. Fear of each other, and, in Traquair's case, an absorbing plan of revenge, had kept them from taking her until the time should be ripe. But it was borne in upon Carver that one of them would surely return for her. It was impossible to say what was happening between them out at sea. But of one thing he was certain: Suppose them to have gone as enemies; one must vanquish the other. He it was who would come home victorious in search of the woman he desired.

Carver went back slowly to the ruined house. Something gleamed in the moonlight. He picked it up and found it was a glass stopper. The smell of whisky still clung to it. He turned his face once more towards the woods where Judith slept on through the darkness. His mind was made up. He must wait for the return of either Poldhu or Traquair. Judith was the magnet whose lure would not fail. It did not seem strange to him that neither of the men had thought about her in that wild rush to the ships. He knew that, in spite of the sentimentalism of the age, in spite of the over-idealization of the weaker sex, woman rarely holds first place in a man's heart. Fighting, adventure, lust of gold, hatred of the men who have wronged him—these are the things that reign supreme. So it was with himself. So it was with Poldhu and Traquair.

He would wait, then. In the morning he would find Kukeke, and send a message to McGinty to lay off a bit longer. He entered the dusky shade beneath the palms. Judith lay where he had left her. One arm was flung out beside her. He touched her hand gently and found it was cold. Cautiously he sat down beside her and lifted her in his arms. Her body lay limp and

relaxed like that of a sleeping child. As he pillowed her head on his shoulder she murmured drowsily. He realized that this must be the first time for weeks that she had slept without fear. Mingled with his love was pity, a queer protective pity for the slim body that housed so dauntless a spirit.

All through the night he sat there, still as some statue carven out of the darkness, waiting for dawn.

CHAPTER XVII

THE DEATH SHIP

POLDHU sailed blindly, without aim or destination. His sole endeavor was to throw off his enemy. He sat crouched over the tiller, driving the ship forward into the night. "Surely the darkness shall cover me" . . . Where had he heard those words? But the moon was high. She it was who would betray him to Traquair. The boys were silent. He knew they were frightened. They went about their work sullenly. If it came to a scrap, would they stand by him? He shook his head doubtfully. Probably Traquair had more influence than he had. Besides, the *Amaranth* carried a gun. The *Wolf's* gun was ashore.

He wondered how long it would be before Traquair fired. There had been a moonlight night two years back, over near Amanu, when they had chased the *Patsy* and sent her away limping, with a leak that most likely sank her before morning. There had been a quarrel with that red-headed chap who owned her—Simmons his name was. Where was he now? Dead, most likely. Few men live to grow old in the Islands.

Well, Simmons wouldn't be much loss. He'd been a blackbirder in his time. Government made a damn sight too much fuss about slave dealing. Anyone would think the Kanakas had souls to be saved. The missionaries had raised Cain about the traffic, and they could make out a pretty case when they liked. And when Government wanted to find out something, it asked the opinion of the missionaries first. What did they want to come fooling round the Islands for, anyway? The Kanakas were much better off before they wore pants and learned to yowl at prayer meetings.

Couldn't the folks at home understand that the boys got converted afresh every time a new missionary came along? There was Tali, Traquair's boy. He'd been a Mormon, a Roman Catholic, a Wesleyan, and a Baptist. And underneath it all he worshipped the old gods that his ancestors had worshipped from the beginning of time.

The *Wolf* swayed under the wind. Glancing back, Poldhu fancied that the *Amaranth* was gaining. He dare not let out more sail. Already the ship was carrying too much canvas. She lurched perilously as a gust of wind caught her broadside on. The heaving sea poured over her deck. Poldhu had no fancy to be drowned. They said that men who met death at sea never rested. Their spirits went into the bodies of the petrels, those birds who haunt the ships as they hurry through the sea. All rot, of course. Still, it would be a wet-tish sort of end.

The *Amaranth* was drawing closer. He knew it. Soon Traquair would fire. And he would fire to kill.

Poldhu called to one of the boys, Maiti by name, and bade him take the tiller. He himself went below to the inner cabin where the Dreaming God stood, wedged carefully in its wrappings between two sea chests. He took the figure and set it on the table. Cautiously he unwrapped it, until it stood revealed in the light of the swinging lamp. Its beauty awed him. Whose dead hand had carved the subtle smile that curved the lips? In what forgotten brain had the vision been conceived? Lightly he ran his fingers over the folds of the dress and touched the closed lids. In one golden hand was a golden rose, a thing of exquisite perfection. Of what did he dream; this god for whose beauty so much wrong had been done? The Chinese were clever, devilishly clever. Poldhu had been in China and he knew strange things. Who could say what magic lay in this silent gold?

There was a crash on deck. Traquair had fired his first shot. Hurriedly Poldhu thrust the figure back into its wrappings and rushed up the companion. The Kanakas were quiet but trembling. They showed him where the shot had ripped through the mainsail. Even as they stood there something whizzed by and buried itself in the deck. Maiti at the tiller began to whine. Poldhu cursed him until he

grew quiet with terror. No other shot came for twenty minutes. Straining his eyes Poldhu realized Traquair's plan. The *Amaranth* was tacking, working round to windward, until the *Wolf* should present a broadside at which to aim. The third shot ploughed up the water ten yards away. The fourth ricocheted from the mainmast and struck Lepepa, a Parawa boy, who fell to the deck with his chest shattered. They dragged him to the cabin-head and propped him, groaning, in its shelter.

Poldhu's face took on a grim look. He recognized Traquair's tactics. They were those which he himself employed in an attack. How many times had he and Traquair harried a ship in this way? First the chase, then the shots broadside on, and the last phase—the ram. That was what Traquair would try. He knew it. Bitterly he cursed his own lack of foresight in taking the *Wolf's* gun ashore for repairs. He put the ship about and headed northeast. Traquair must sail hotly indeed if he meant to ram the *Wolf*.

The thought of Morton crossed his brain. Where was he? Surely the *Seamew* should be somewhere around. Morton must have been kicking his heels impatiently for days on end, waiting for the signal to return to Parawa. Poldhu's eyes scanned the sea with feverish concentration. But there was no sign, no winking starboard light to hint at Morton's sturdy presence.

TRAQUAIR watched the *Wolf* as she turned northeast. Her stern made but a poor mark in the moonlight. He fired again and swore as he marked where the shot ripped the water. He was gaining on her. Inch by inch the *Amaranth* crept up towards her prey. Traquair found himself singing an air that he recognized at last as the song that the Waihiti boys sang when they went after the shark. The song of the killer, they called it. His own boys caught up the lilt. It rose louder and stronger upon the rushing wind. He determined to waste no more shots. He must strain every muscle to draw alongside. Only thus might he see his desire for revenge upon his enemy satisfied.

Through the halyards the night wind whistled. The smoke of the spray leaped aboard, covering the decks with a thin sheen that gleamed in the moonlight. The swirl of the cross-surges caught the *Ama-*

ranth, spinning her round like a bit of drift-wood. Traquair righted her with difficulty.

"If I can get the *Wolf's* tiller, she's mine," was the thought in his mind as he swung the *Amaranth* through the treacherous patch of water. "Poldhu is scared. If he weren't, he'd turn and fight."

As carefully as he could, he took aim. The shot went wide. The ship's gun was of an old-fashioned pattern. He and Poldhu had planned to get one brought from Melbourne. They had discussed it long ago, and settled to have it after the *Princess Helen* affair. Well, he'd get it alone now. From that time on he would work on his own.

The second shot struck the *Wolf*. He wondered what damage had been done. He turned to Tali, a question on his lips. It was queer that Tali should be at the other end of the ship. He could have sworn someone stood at his elbow. For a moment he felt queer. Then he shook off the sensation of uneasiness and loaded again.

After the third shot he stood back, watching intently. It seemed to him that the *Wolf* staggered. Now or never he must make his supreme effort. He shouted to Tali to let out the jib-topsail. With the wind that was blowing, this was risky in the extreme. But only by the extra spread of canvas could he overtake the *Wolf*. He cared nothing for the danger involved. In his heart was the beginning of triumph. Soon he felt the vessel swaying under the extra sail. She careened in the trough of the waves until it seemed that she must ship water. Traquair urged her on. The tiller moved under his hands like a live thing. Nearer and nearer they crept towards the hurrying *Wolf*. They were within a bow-shot. They were within a stone's throw.

Traquair called Tali to be ready with a rope. He meant to lash the ships together. Poldhu had guessed wrong. He did not intend to ram. Who could say what might happen to the thing he sought if he rammed the *Wolf*?

A shot bit the deck close to his feet. Poldhu carried a Colt, and he was a man who hit his mark as a rule. Traquair drew his gun. He called Tali to the tiller and crept forward under cover of the cabin-head till his hand touched the stock of the bowsprit. Cautiously he raised himself and then fired. His shot was answered immediately. This time his hammer

snapped harmlessly in reply. With dismay he realized that his gun was empty. He thrust it back into his belt.

They were almost alongside. The boy Mateo was busy with the fenders. As he pushed the last one into place Poldhu's gun spoke again and the boy toppled into the water without a cry. Traquair shouted to Tali to lash the tiller. He himself flung the rope. Deftly aimed it caught a stanchion aboard the *Wolf*. The ships jerked towards each other, compelled by the straining rope. The gap between the boats lessened, and still the rope held. The swaying of the planks made steady aim impossible. Poldhu was shooting again, wild, panic-stricken shots that never found their mark in the shadowy moonlight. Four—five—Traquair had kept count. As the sixth rang out he smiled grimly. Poldhu's gun was empty now.

It was the moment for which he had waited. He drew back, steeling his muscles. Then he took a running leap. For a flash of time the dark water heaved beneath him. Then his outstretched hands met the *Wolf's* gunwale. His arms were jerked almost out of their sockets. He hung on like death, bracing his shoulders for the upward heave. As he flung one leg over the gunwale someone rushed at him. In the darkness his right arm shot out with such force that he sprawled head foremost on the deck. Instantly Maiti was on him, fighting like a wild cat. Traquair staggered to his feet. Was Poldhu afraid to do his own dirty work? He gripped the struggling Maiti and lifted him off his feet. Then with all his might he flung him down on the deck. There was a sickening crash. The Kanaka did not rise again. Traquair looked around for Poldhu.

Ah, there he was, coming warily through the moonlight that silvered the mast. Traquair set his teeth and sprang.

THEY fought it out there on the deck of the *Wolf*. All the hatred that burned between them leaped into a blaze at last. Because they were bound by old memories, old guilty days, old secrets, they fought more bitterly. Each knew that the other would fight to the death. Traquair's heart leapt fiercely at the touch of Poldhu's bare flesh beneath his driving fist. Many a battle had they fought side by side. Each knew the other's

powers of endurance, as their arms rose and fell. Traquair feinted and got in an uppercut that jerked Poldhu's head back and sent him reeling. The ship rolled and a spate of foam thudded across the deck. He shook himself and came on again.

Poldhu was fighting desperately. If he could only get his arms round Traquair's body, he could crack his ribs. He was the stronger. He wrestled the Cornish way. If he once gripped Traquair he could do what he would. But Traquair would not come to close quarters. He knew the danger which threatened him. He held off. His blows were few but shrewd. Once his hand went to his belt and Poldhu caught the gleam of steel. He drew back, getting his breath with hoarse whooping sounds. Then he leapt forward again, his knife in his hand.

They fought more warily now, creeping round each other with eyes that strained through the moonlit dusk to guess the next movement. Traquair feigned to crouch for a spring. Before he could recover himself Poldhu was at him. He felt a thin hot pain that ran from shoulder to wrist of his left arm. Poldhu was laughing, wild laughter that went echoing among the topmast shrouds like the laughter of a ghost.

"I'll get you," he was saying in a high, queer voice. "I'll get you, Traquair."

Traquair grunted. The pain in his arm was intense. If he let it master him, it would be the end. He must strike and strike soon. He drew back. Poldhu was rocking with the force of the combat. He was suddenly helpless, as one blinded. Traquair tightened his hand on the haft of his knife, and sprang.

The knife sank home

As sure as Traquair!

II

TALI shouted that the rope showed signs of parting very soon. Hurriedly Traquair ran down the companion into the cabin. Surely here he would find what he sought.

The hanging lamp burned well, and his eyes roved here and there until he saw the muffled figure of the Dreaming God. With hands that trembled he took it up, and placed it on the table. He took off the cloths that Poldhu had wrapped round it. A gleam of gold showed through a hole

in the stuff. Eagerly his fingers tore at the last layer.

From the deck came shouts. Two of his boys had followed him aboard. They had discovered Poldhu's remaining boy. The sound of combat waxed loud. But Traquair was oblivious of everything save the exultant thought that now at last he was master, and that the thing he desired was his to do with as he would. Carver—bah! It wasn't likely he'd be picked up alive. Even if he were, he'd had his lesson. He would not venture to cross swords again with Traquair.

It was with reluctance that Traquair muffled the god again in its wrappings. His eyes feasted on the gleaming, shining thing. His hands touched it, as Poldhu's hands had touched it an hour before. What secret lay behind those closed lids?

The ship lurched. He heard an ominous scraping sound as the two boats rubbed sides. From afar came Tali's agonized shout, beseeching him to hurry. Hastily he covered the Dreaming God again, and turned to the companion. Halfway up he paused, looking over his shoulder. There was no one behind. Then why had the bottom step creaked like that?

He gained the deck and discovered that he was sweating. Afraid? Damned nonsense. What did he fear? To reassure himself he swore roundly at the two Kanakas who waited for him, demanding why they had not called to him that Tali was anxious about the rope. The ships were perilously near together. Lucky that he had thought to sling out the fenders, or the *Amaranth's* side would be in ribbons by now. He shouted to Tali to stand by and catch the bundle that he carried in his arms. Then he and the two Kanakas swung over the side and made their way hand over hand along the rope that bound the two ships. When they were safely aboard the *Amaranth* Tali let go the rope. Instantly the vessels sprang apart.

The moon was waning. Soon it would be dawn. The *Amaranth* turned south again, tacking against a head wind. The *Wolf* rolled helplessly towards the north-east, sport of the winds and waves.

Along the eastern horizon a faint streak of gray broke the darkness. Time passed and the sun came up in scarlet and gold. Higher and higher he rose till his blinding beams flooded the deck of the *Wolf*. They

gilded the top-mast and made the mainsail a thing of beauty. Presently they crept down and shone straight on Poldhu.

But Poldhu never turned his head to the shade, nor did the lids droop over those staring eyes.

CHAPTER XVIII

HOMECOMING

THE *Kestrel* came mincing towards the northern side of Parawa. McGinty had spent a feverish night, consumed with impatience and dread. Who could say what might be happening in this accursed island whose name was a byword among the Kanakas? They said it was haunted by the ghosts of the drowned. McGinty wondered in passing whether Traquair had fostered that legend for his own ends.

With sunup the *Wolf* hove into view on the port beam. She was a good way off, but not too far for McGinty's observant eyes to see that she was rolling heavily and making way without guidance. She was carrying too much sail for the breeze that was blowing. She tossed and bucketed dangerously. In the reckless hands of the wind she was as helpless as a match end. McGinty caught his breath anxiously as he watched her through the glass. Now the heaving sea attacked her, and she reared and plunged like a scared beast.

No one moved on board. There seemed no sign of life. Then she turned and McGinty had a view of the mainmast that made him examine the glass and then look again. Someone was aboard then. But why did he lie so still, with his arms stretched above his head? McGinty put down the glass and shouted to the Kanaka boy at the tiller to put the ship about. His heart was filled with a nameless fear. He must know—he must know for certain who it was that rested so still aboard the swaying boat on the port beam. It took them the best part of an hour to get within hailing distance. McGinty cupped his hands and sent a long "Ahoy!" over the water. He was not answered. But his worst fears were quieted. It was not Carver. He went below and poured himself out a double. It seemed he was going to need all his nerve in the course of the next

hour. The *Wolf*—the *Wolf*—Poldhu, of course. He had met him once in Amanu. They said Traquair was running with Poldhu, though no one seemed to know for sure what they were doing. If this was Traquair's work——

McGinty slung over the side into the rocking dingey. The oars raised their dripping blades and plunged again. Clots of foam thudded into the thwarts, and deckled the rowers' brown backs. McGinty approached the *Wolf* warily. From a stanchion there hung a rope end that looked as if someone had cut it in a hurry. He stood up in the swaying boat and grabbed it. Hand over hand he climbed until he stood on deck, breathing hard.

Near the deck-house lay the body of a Kanaka. It was battered. McGinty judged that it had slid up and down the deck as the ship swayed. He glanced at it and then passed by. There was no need to waste any sentiment on a dead Kanaka.

He drew near to the thing he sought. He stood staring at it, fascinated, horrified. Traquair had done his work well. McGinty noted where the knife had struck and marked the shrewdness of the thrusts. Poldhu had died hard. Overhead a bird wheeled and wheeled. McGinty looked up. It was a sea eagle.

"I can't leave him," he thought. "Damn it all, the blighter's a white. I don't care a curse what he's done. The birds ain't goin' to get him."

He shouted for Pohete, a Degas Island boy, to come aboard. Unlike most of the islanders the Degas Kanakas show no fear of touching a dead man. Pohete swung himself aboard and stood by his master. McGinty pointed to the circling eagle.

"You stay here keep off bird," he said. "Must go below. Suppose you all same frighten you make shout."

"Not frighten," said Pohete. "Me Degas boy, me not frighten."

McGinty went below. There were no signs of a struggle in the cabin. Evidently all the fighting had taken place on deck. Not a thing worth bothering about here. There was something desolate and unearthly in the stillness. As he groped about he noticed that the back of his neck was wet. Scared? Huh!

All the same he hurried on deck. Pohete crouched by Poldhu unmoved. His brown fingers were straying over the arm-muscles where they showed under the stretched skin. He felt the throat and the shoulders. Then he touched his own. In a kind of chant he invited the spirit of the dead man to enter his own body, that he might possess the strength that had belonged to Poldhu. They believed on Degas that the soul of a man stayed by the body until a living person offered it hospitality. (Therefore when a weakling died everyone was extremely careful to refrain from any expression which should give the waiting spirit a chance.)

"Come off it," said McGinty impatiently. Pohete stepped back. Already he felt a new sense of bravery, of physical strength. He puffed out his chest and stroked his arms and shoulders.

A fin cleft the water. Above, the eagle was screaming with baffled rage. McGinty sent Pohete below to look for old sailcloth or tarpaulin. While the boy was gone he tried to straighten Poldhu's limbs, but without avail. In vain he attempted to force the arms down to the sides. Poldhu's shoulders defied all his efforts. Pohete came on deck, trailing a piece of sailcloth that he had found after prolonged rum-maging.

They made shift with the rumpled cloth and such weights as they could find. When the last rope end had been knotted securely, McGinty rose from the deck and looked out to sea. The sun was high. Carver . . . Carver . . . This blasted island and the treasure which it held, the treasure for which Carver and Traquair would fight when they met until one of them fell and lay still. He must hurry. If the longboat—lucky that the *Kestrel* carried two boats—if the longboat were still ashore he would signal Kukeke to come out to him and they would try to make the opening into the secret lagoon. The beggar had been to Parawa before. Surely he ought to have some ideas on the subject of getting in.

McGinty looked down at the sailcloth. Then he took off his cap and cleared his throat. Pohete, aware that there was going to be mitinari-talk, folded his hands and looked unspeakably devout. McGinty wished he knew the "Burial at Sea." Well, he didn't, and he was blown if he was going

to waste time looking for a blooming prayer book on this sanguinary ship. He came straight to the point.

"Gawd," he said, "this is Poldhu. Our Father, Which art in Heaven . . ."

"Now," he called to Pohete. There was a heave, and a splash.

McGINTY could not take the *Wolf* in tow if he wished to negotiate the dangerous passage into Parawa. He hesitated whether to tow her nearer inshore, or to leave her where she was. In the end he decided to cast anchor and leave her where she was until—it did not occur to him to use the word "if"—they returned from Parawa. Then he and Carver could decide whether to tow her to Waihiti or report her derelict to the resident at Amanu.

When he got aboard the *Kestrel* again he put about and headed for the northern side. Anxiously he scanned the shore, raking the beach and the cliffs for some sign of Carver. Presently he made out Kukeke, waving frantically. But Carver was nowhere to be seen. He shouted, but they were too far apart for him to understand the Kanaka's cries. Evidently Carver had not returned and Kukeke was terrified. McGinty beckoned, roaring to him across the water to put off and return to the *Kestrel*. Kukeke shook his head mournfully. McGinty called to the boys to yell.

"You tell Kukeke come back now damn quick. Suppose Kahiva not come we go Parawa right in find Kahiva. Kukeke he savvy lagoon belong Parawa. Suppose Kukeke not come too late, maybe Kahiva he die."

Their high voices floated in unison to Kukeke. He understood them. Reluctantly he dragged the longboat to the water's edge and pushed off. McGinty stood in as far as he dared. The oily current that runs forever past Parawa seized the cockleshell and twirled it derisively. The *Kestrel* edged westward, keeping pace with the longboat as it was swept onwards. Kukeke strained and sweated. He longed for the aid of Kahiva's powerful arms. His own ached. The scorching sun on the water blinded him. McGinty, watching, gave him up twice as lost. By slow degrees he drew nearer. His arms rose and fell wearily. A coil of rope flew through

the air. The end rested on the water and he reached it after centuries. With hands that shook with fatigue he made it fast. Pohete and the rest hauled in. They helped him aboard and pulled up the longboat. By this time it was late afternoon.

The *Kestrel* turned to the southwest and nosed along until she came opposite the spot from which Carver and McGinty had seen the *Amaranth* emerge on that misty morning weeks ago. At first sight it seemed impossible that there should be an opening of any sort in these grim cliffs. But Kukeke, restored by food and adulation, reassured McGinty on that point. With an intelligence that was almost uncanny he watched for the remembered landmarks. He stood in the bows, his brown body gleaming in the sun, his shock of stiff wiry hair standing out like a great bush. McGinty swallowed hard. It went sorely against the grain that the *Kestrel* must depend on this nigger. The reefs round Parawa were like sharks' teeth, so they said. Anyone who sailed in close needed a spare shroud aboard. The ship moved slowly, under the minimum of canvas. Kukeke's right arm shot out, and the tiller under McGinty's hand obeyed the direction. Port — straight on — port — straight on — starboard . . . The brown arms rose and fell and Kukeke's slim body was taut under the strain. He never hesitated, never faltered. Had he not sailed in here with the dread Traquair? The wall of rock loomed up before them. Destruction seemed inevitable and McGinty braced himself for the shock of head-on destruction. There was no turning about here, among these shoals.

"Starboard," said Kukeke's arm, and they glided into an opening so narrow that it seemed impossible they could squeeze through. Pohete, daring greatly, leaned over and touched the sheer rock with the tips of his fingers.

They slid into the lagoon. Before them lay the voluptuous beauty of the island. But McGinty did not see the curving shore, the hot fierce colors of the land, the peacock blue of the water under the setting sun. His eyes were fixed on a ship at anchor. The *Amaranth* was in. He hailed her and a sleepy-eyed Kanaka answered him. Traquair was not aboard. Then he and Carver . . . Was it too late?

II

TRAQUAIR brought the *Amaranth* into the lagoon and heard the anchor chains rattle over the side. The anchor sank through the blue water, scaring the eels that cracked their long bodies like soundless whips as they scuttled away from the descending flukes. At sight of the ship a catamaran put off from shore. There were welcoming cries, and a confused babel of inquiry concerning Poldhu.

Traquair's hurt proved to be merely a flesh wound. He sat on deck and held out his left arm while Tali dressed it with wet strips of old linen. Well, it was the last wound that Poldhu would give. He was gone now, damn his eyes, and good riddance. How many lives had he sent before him into the shades? How many good ships had he wrecked? It would take him all his time to settle with the dead. For Traquair there remained the living—and to him that meant Judith. He had done well to wait, after all. His plans, his cunning plans, had matured as he desired. Nothing lay between him and his longing now. Nicode had gone. Poldhu had gone. Carver—odd that he should think of Carver. It wasn't likely that chap was still alive. But if he were, there was little need to fear him.

Judith . . . Judith!

He went over the side and felt the catamaran dip sharply under his sudden weight. The Kanakas pushed off. Nearer and nearer grew the strip of white beach. A lory bird flew past, an arrow of flaming color. In the clear water the palms near the shore lay mirrored. Traquair drew a long breath. On the floor of the catamaran lay the Dreaming God still wrapped in its covers. He put out a jealous hand to steady it as the boat rocked under the energy of the paddles. He would suffer none but himself to lift it ashore. Surely here was heart's desire at last in the peace of Parawa.

He landed and went up the beach. Among the trees he saw the ruined house with its charred walls. The boys clustered round him, deafening him with their explanations and their lamentations. He swept them away. What was a burnt house to him? Did not Judith wait for him somewhere?

"Yudita? Yudita go in trees, not come

all time, maybe frighten, maybe come back all same quick now Tarakawa he come."

Traquair nodded. Of course she had been scared. Of course she would come running to him out of the wood now that the shadow of Poldhu was lifted for ever. He would not tell her what had happened. Women are so squeamish. He must make up some yarn about Poldhu flinging off in a rage to Amanu. She would not question what he chose to tell her. If she did, he would stop her lips with his own. He pulled some jasmine flowers and buried his face in the thick sweet-scented petals. Oh, the long lazy days and the short dreaming nights that awaited him! And when man's blood stirred in him again and he must be off and away at the call of the sea, he would not go alone.

He flung himself down in the shade of the ruined walls. It was noonday and the sun stood high. How long was it since he had slept? He stretched himself, wincing at the pain in his left shoulder. Resting his head on his arms he closed his eyes. He must sleep before he went to find Judith. For the first time he became conscious of the weariness which held him in thrall. Yes, he would sleep and wake at sunset with his mind and body rested. He would not go to Judith as he was, worn and blood-stained and spent.

Was she waiting for him, longing for him, hoping that he and not Poldhu would return to claim her? He must not think of Poldhu. Somehow he wished that Poldhu had not screamed that way. He could hear him still, though Poldhu would never scream again. Odd, then, that the sound should yet ring in his ears. He shifted his position, turning his head, but it was no use.

Nicode had not screamed. He had lain still, uttering no sound. Oh, why the hell trouble to think of Nicode? He was gone. Traquair's mind went off at a tangent to the thought of what Lefroy would say when he found Nicode. Of course he must have found him. Would anyone find Poldhu? Well, whoever sighted him would get a nasty shock. Traquair wondered whether he had done wisely to leave the *Wolf* afloat. Yet no one could prove anything. Oh, yes, there were his own boys. He'd like to see one of them turn evidence against him. Let one of 'em try it on, that was

all. Besides, how absurd to suppose anyone would find Poldhu just yet. By the time he was discovered, the *Amaranth* would be well away.

The *Sultan* was—was she come or gone? What date was it? Why, she was due that night. Well, let her go. He was too tired to cope with her single-handed. He wanted to get away from this hidden island. Nothing should prevent him from sailing out with the dawn. If he could but sleep! But sleep proved unkind. It eluded him. His brain triumphed over his body. Before his closed eyes figures flitted in unwearying procession. And always in his ears rang the sound of Poldhu's voice. Restlessly he wondered whether Luani were still about and undisturbed by the Kanakas.

Why couldn't he sleep? One roving hand shot out and touched the Dreaming God that lay by his side, securely wrapped in its coverings. He had no fear that the Kanakas would try to steal it. Long ago he had created a legend that whoever stole from him would die. To give point to this he had rubbed poison on some sticks of tobacco and left them lying about. The thieving Kanaka who stole them died within the hour. From that time Traquair's possessions had been tabu. None dared to touch them.

A bird was crying somewhere, a sea eagle, to judge by its raucous yell. Opening his eyes he saw it sailing far overhead. It vanished from sight and he turned over, furious at his own wakefulness.

Where was she all this time? Had she seen him come in? She must know that the *Amaranth* had returned. Perhaps even now she waited for him among the trees, too shy to come to him. He wondered whether he would have any trouble with her. She had changed, subtly but unmistakably, since he had brought her to Parawa. It might have been that she had taken his hints about Poldhu and was trying to appear more indifferent than she felt.

An icy wind of doubt blew across his mind. He was deceiving himself. She had grown cold. He must start again to woo her. Luani! There lay the explanation. Naturally she was jealous. He must tread carefully, then. He must show her how little Luani counted, that she was indeed less than nothing to him.

Sleep.

Resolutely he shut his eyes, turning his face further toward the shade of the wall.

BUT sleep brought him strange, uneasy dreams. Tali, creeping to look at his master, marked his frowning face and his restless, unquiet movements. He was breathing heavily and the Kanaka stole away again to confide to his fellows that Tarakawa looked all same sick.

Long shadows crept about the beach. The sun went sliding down the sky until it disappeared behind the cliffs. The lagoon darkened. The embers of day burned fiercely in the sky, holding at bay the quenching army of the dark. Still Traquair slept. He was dreaming of the *Amaranth*. He lay in his bunk again and heard his door sliding again. He felt a little thin wind playing about his face. Outside came the sound that comes when a man shifts from one stealthy foot to the other. Again he lifted his heavy boot and sent it crashing at the door. But this time the door slid wider. It opened and there stood Nicode, strangely white and still. Traquair snatched his gun and fired and fired again, pointblank shots that, ought to have smashed Nicode. The man did not flinch. Presently he began to move forward. Traquair hit out with the butt end of his gun. The figure paid no heed. Suddenly Nicode began to scream, loudly, horribly. But the voice was the voice of Poldhu.

Traquair awoke to find himself in a bath of sweat. So real had the dream been that he could have sworn Nicode stood before him. To reassure himself he stood up jerkily and glanced round. It was nearly dark. A white blur caught his eye. A ship had come in while he slept. It must be the *Seamew* with Morton aboard, Morton slinking back to Parawa after all these weeks. Then Morton must be dealt with very soon. In the swift-growing night he would not be able to distinguish the *Amaranth* from the *Wolf*. Seeing the outlines of only one ship in the harbor he would naturally take it for Poldhu's. He must continue to think so until he landed. Traquair shouted to the Kanakas, forbidding any catamaran to set out for the incoming ship. He preferred that Morton should not be warned.

Tali was making a fire on the beach. Traquair walked stiffly, shaking the weariness

out of his limbs. He sat down beside the smoldering twigs. Soon they would blaze up. He shouted for more brushwood to be brought. At a fire near by, Tali was busy with a pot, from which issued savory smells. Traquair shook the horror of his nightmare from his mind and bade the boy make haste. When he had staved his hunger he would go and find Judith. What was she doing all this time? Surely she would cease her roaming when night fell. Among the bushes the fireflies were beginning to dance. The sun had gone and the fires of heaven died away before the rising moon. The warm, sensuous night came on tiptoe through the palms, covering all lesser shadows with her dark beauty. Farther down the beach other fires gleamed. The crooning of soft voices reached Traquair's ears. In his nostrils was the scent of jasmine flowers.

Was Morton afraid to land? The ship lay white and ghostly in the moonlight. No one seemed to be putting off from her. It was queer how different ships looked at night. The *Seamew* looked clumsy in the daylight. But tonight there was something—something almost unfamiliar about her.

The fire was burning up now. Its ruddy light made a circle of brightness. Traquair stretched out his hands to the warmth. His arm was easier. It would soon heal. Tali had left the cooking-pot and run off on some errand of his own. Traquair began to get impatient. He decided to go across and see what was happening to the food.

Just as he was about to rise he heard a sound that froze him where he sat. It was the squelch of a boot on the sand behind him. Someone was walking with long, steady steps towards him. It was not the bare foot of a Kanaka that made that sound, nor yet Judith's light tread. It was a man. Who, then? No one had landed from that silent ship. He knew of no other white man but himself on the island.

Beads of sweat began to prick his forehead. On came those steady steps behind him. He tried to look round and could not, for fear of what he might see. The blood ebbed away from his face. Surely it could not be . . . The footsteps stopped.

He forced himself to look up. On the other side of the fire stood Carver.

CHAPTER XIX

IN THE DARK NIGHT

"YOU!" Traquair shouted, stunned.
 "Yes," said Carver grimly.
 "Didn't expect me, did you?"

For a long time they stared at each other across the leaping flames.

"Well?" said Traquair at last.

"Guess there's not much need of talking," retorted Carver. "Get up, you swine, and take what's coming to you. By God, Traquair, it's one of us this time."

Traquair sprang to his feet. They faced each other across the fire. Carver's eyes fell on the wrappings of the Dreaming God. Through a rent the yellow gold gleamed.

"That's mine."

"Go to hell," growled Traquair. "You'll not lay a hand on it. It belongs to the man who's strong enough to keep it."

"I've been looking for you for four years. You knew it. You've been afraid. Yes, you have. That's why you left me and McGinty in the longboat, and took Judith."

At the name Traquair's anger leaped up.

"What's she got to do with you? It's me she loves. Keep her name out of your mouth."

"You! Do you reckon she's in love with you, rotter that you are? She was blind when she got a notion that she cared about you. Well, she's not blind now."

"Liar!" said Traquair furiously. "Do you think Judith and I don't know each other? Do you think we've been on Parawa all this time and not understood each other? I tell you she's mine."

"You're not fit to touch her. Where's Nicode?"

"What the blazes does it matter to you where Nicode is?"

"It doesn't matter. But he's dead. Dead on Flanders Island, isn't he? Oh, she knows. One of your boys—Tali—told her so. Isn't that enough, without anything else, to sicken her of the sight of you?"

"Tali's a liar. I'll flay the truth out of him. Nicode—Nicode's alive. This is a put-up job, I tell you. Judith's too sane to believe any rot that a fool Kanaka makes up."

The fire shone on his white face. Into his eyes came a hunted look.

"Judith!" Carver's voice rang out.

She came down the beach at Carver's shout, walking slowly with her head flung back and her mouth firm. Within the shadow she halted, white, desirable.

"What is it?"

"Come here," said Carver.

In a dream Traquair watched her as she went to Carver. Had she always been so beautiful? He saw his plans dissolving like mist. He had lost her then. This supreme loveliness would never be his. He could not mistake the way she looked at Carver. He could not cheat himself any more. This, then, was the meaning of her coldness. He had thought she was indifferent for fear of Poldhu. And all the time she had cared for this enemy. The sharp pain in his heart was more than he could bear.

"Judith," he said hoarsely.

At his voice she turned from Carver and looked at him.

"Where's my father?"

"Judith," he said again, "listen to me. I swear it was an accident about—about Nicode. You must understand——"

"The thing you planned for Poldhu wasn't an accident."

"Judith——"

"Shut up!" she cried furiously. "Nothing you can say will make any difference. It's true what they say on Waihiti, that you've got the blood-lust. Do you think I'd ever care about a man who's done the things you've done? You and Poldhu—pirates—wreckers— Oh, yes, I've listened while Poldhu talked. He wasn't always—discreet. You could be strung up half a dozen times for the things you've done. Your hands are red, Traquair. They'll not touch me."

She looked down at the Dreaming God.

"Why have you come back alone without Poldhu? Last night you didn't know where that thing was. Now you've got it. Where's Poldhu? Don't tell me he gave it to you."

For answer he looked at her. She shrank back against Carver. The love for her which had consumed Traquair turned to hatred, curdled by its own fierceness . . . Wait, Judith. Wait till Carver lies still and cold under the trees. Your turn will come.

Carver put his arms round her, and at the sight Traquair's jealous rage leaped beyond bounds.

"I'll have you yet," he shouted. "You'll

pay for this. Wait till I've settled with Carver. Wait till I get you aboard the *Amaranth* with no one to hear you when you cry——"

He broke off.

"Oh, Judith," he said, "I loved you so."

But Carver had no ears for the pain that thrilled in his enemy's voice. He put Judith from him, back into the shadow. Then he came forward warily. He did not mean to use his gun. It had failed him that other time in Hogan's place. This time he would break Traquair by the strength of his hands.

TRAQUAIR was waiting for him. 'Round the fire they circled, sharp-eyed, cautious. The light of the flames fell on their bare arms, their set faces. Without taking his eyes from Carver, Traquair lifted the Dreaming God and flung it on the soft sand behind him, out of the risk of trampling feet. Dimly he was aware that the Kanakas by the beach fires were watching. They would not interfere. He and Poldhu had taught them to beware of white men's quarrels. He saw Carver crouching for a spring, and braced his shoulders to meet the shock.

Carver leaped across the fire and closed with him. At the touch of each other's flesh, the savagery that lay in their natures broke forth. Ancient hatred, denied so long, flared afresh as they gripped each other in the lust of battle. They were well matched.

To Judith, watching with clenched hands, it seemed doubtful which way the fight would go. The Kanakas left their fires and crept nearer. They chattered to each other in shrill undertones. Who was the white man who had come out of the night? They knew from Tali what Tarakawa had done to Poldhu. A man who could kill Poldhu must be strong all same devil. They respected strength. Yet Poldhu had been their master. With their awe of Traquair was mingled a certain dissatisfaction. It was not well that their master should have been killed. Therefore they held aloof, unwilling to take sides.

'Round and 'round the fire went the two men, fighting silently. They were saving breath for the long struggle. As yet they had exchanged but few blows, testing each other's strength, holding back until they had found the mode of attack.

Traquair feinted and drew Carver's right. Swiftly he shot out with his left. Before Carver could recover he got in an uppercut that sent him reeling back. Panting, he waited for the other to rise. Carver shook the sand out of his eyes and came on again more warily. He wondered whether Traquair would use a knife. They closed again, each trying to grip the other and throw him. Poldhu had taught Traquair a trick or two. He tried the Cornish throw in the way that wrestlers use. Almost he succeeded. Carver rocked and swayed, but did not fall. He could feel Traquair's breath hot and furious on his cheek. The great arms tightened round his chest. The firelight gleamed on the golden hairs that showed on Traquair's forearm. The muscles swelled and throbbed with effort. Carver tore himself free. The blood was singing in his ears. Before his eyes a mist rose. It cleared and he grew conscious of Traquair's voice. What was the man singing? Ah, he had it—the song that the Kanakas sing when they go into battle—the song of the killer.

The flames roared higher. He could see the wolfish eyes, the cruel mouth, the clenched, purposeful hands. His heart beat so fiercely that it seemed he must choke. Stubbornly he beat back the feeling of breathlessness. If he could only get Traquair's throat between his hands! The thought obsessed him. Only thus could he kill his enemy.

There was blood on his chest. The skin over that old wound was thin. He glanced down and saw it had broken under Traquair's swinging blows. He knew that Traquair's aim was to stretch him on the sand. All his strength was bent on keeping his feet. He let drive with his fist at Traquair's jaw and felt a thrill of triumph at the shout he wrung from him.

"I'll get you, Carver," Traquair was saying in a queer snarling voice. "Do you think you'll get away with this? You can't escape—Nicode—Poldhu—they didn't."

He staggered back. Blood was oozing from his mouth. He spat it out and wiped his lips with his hand.

"You killed—Nicode—" Carver was panting. "You—you—Poldhu——"

"Yes," Traquair shouted, his eyes ablaze, "I killed Poldhu. Do you hear? I killed him the way I'll kill you. He's dead—dead beside his own mast."

He came on again. In his eyes was a new purpose. He edged round Carver, driving him back, back towards the fire. If he could get in a blow heavy enough to knock him among the flames . . . He had a swift glimpse of Judith. The sight set his heart beating more swiftly. He must have her, he must have her. He could only reach her over Carver's dead body. What so quick to kill as the sinister tongues of fire that crept so quietly from the heart of the blaze? Back and back he forced Carver, never slackening in his blows, aiming now for that red wound on the bare chest. He might have saved himself all this trouble if he had struck a little harder that night in Hongkong four years ago. The pain in his wounded arm was becoming severe. He glanced down and saw that the rough bandages were sodden and red.

The fire, the fire. He must get Carver down, he must send him crashing into the midst of the flames and hold him there, setting his foot on the bleeding chest until the heaving body lay still. But the man had the strength of an ox. It was impossible to down him. Again and again Traquair flung himself at those lean thighs, gripping them until his tearing fingers were bruised and bleeding. It was of no avail. His own wound prevented him from using the force which was needed to overthrow Carver. He drew back for one mighty effort.

Carver braced himself and waited. Traquair was sagging. Let him spend what force he had in attack. When he had worn himself out, then Carver would finish him. Then at last he would feel that bronzed throat beneath his hands. He pushed his black hair out of his eyes. He must conquer. "As sure as Traquair," they said. Well, they damned well wouldn't say that any more.

No, they damned well—

A whirlwind caught him. All Traquair's energy spent itself in a last desperate attempt to throw his foe. He succeeded. Under his onslaught Carver bit the dust, crashing into the sand with such force that he lay there, stunned, for what seemed an eternity. Somehow he was fighting, rolling over and over with Traquair, away from the fire, nearer and nearer to the place where the Dreaming God lay. There was a knife in Traquair's hand. It gleamed sharp in the moonlight. He must get it.

Nothing remained in the whole world except that messenger of death. He reached for Traquair's wrist and caught it, holding it away, heedless of the terrified shouts of the Kanakas, deaf to the sound of Judith's voice, and the tread of hurrying feet along the shore.

WHEN the *Kestrel* crept into the lagoon McGinty put out his sea anchors with the utmost caution. He did not know how hurriedly he might have to get out. The large canvas bags swelled and filled, steadying the ship, keeping her from drifting shorewards under the wind that leaked in from the sea. It was dusk, and he saw the beach fires winking in the distance. A ship lay at anchor. He judged it to be the *Amaranth*. What had happened during the day? And where was Carver?

To his surprise no catamarans came gliding across the dark water to the *Kestrel*. It was impossible that Traquair had not seen him. He felt uneasy. Should he put off and see for himself how matters were ashore? It was so quiet in the lagoon after the roar of the sea. He strained his ears. Was that a murmur of voices that rose from the dim beach? For some time he stood by, racked with indecision.

"Makinitee," said Kukeke, "Kahiva not come. Suppose Kahiva, suppose Tarakawa fight—all same bad. Makinitee not go look find Kahivá?"

"By and by," returned McGinty.

He stared through the darkness again. Shouts, surely he could hear shouts.

"Suppose Tarakawa kill Kahiva, all same bad," persisted Kukeke.

McGinty's mind was made up. He called for the dingey to be lowered. He must get ashore at once. God knew what was taking place over there by the beach fires.

The dingey shot through the moonlit water. Before him loomed the shore, menacing, unknown. Mysterious shadows moved on the white sand, fantastic wavering shapes cast by the waving palms. They said the island was haunted. Landing thus, in the night, a man might easily believe it. He and Kukeke drew the boat up the beach. The Kanaka was shivering with fear and excitement. Like all his kind he was easily daunted. Nothing but the thought that Kahiva was in danger would have persuaded him to go ashore on this

terror-ridden island. McGinty called to him and he padded across the sand after the squat form.

Fighting . . . McGinty stopped and listened. Yes, he was right. Damned lucky he had come ashore. That was Carver's voice. He began to run. Behind him he heard Kukeke, running lightfoot as a deer. On, on, until he was near enough to see two bodies that closed and fell apart again in the light of the fire. Still running, he cupped his hands and roared Carver's name. There was no answer. He saw Judith, standing apart, and shouted to her. At the sound of his voice she answered and came hurrying towards him. The fighters were down. He could make out two writhing, twisting forms that struggled amid the flying sand.

Judith was beside him, white-faced, imploring.

"Stop them," she was saying. "The knife—Traquair's knife——"

He hurried on, calling Kukeke to make haste.

"Carver!" he shouted. "Carver!"

But Carver did not answer. All his powers were concentrated in achieving his object. Traquair was above him, striding across him, exultant, awaiting the moment to kill. In his hand shone the cruel knife. Carver's resisting grip was of iron. In vain Traquair poised himself, tearing at the other's wrist. He could not accomplish the downward thrust. Carver's locked elbow defied him.

Who was that shouting?

He turned his head. Carver's fist found his wounded arm, battering at it until he felt the wet blood gushing over his wrist. Across his whirling brain whipped the thought: "That's not Morton." What a fool not to have made sure what ship it was that had come in just after sunset. He had thought it must be the *Seamew*. What other ship——

"Carver! Carver!"

That fellow who ran with Carver—yes, that was who it must be. McGinty, his name was. Judith had talked about him. Carver's knee jerked up into his ribs. The sudden force sent him sprawling into the sand with the other on top. Traquair's writhing hand touched something hard. It was the thing for which they fought, the ultimate prize, the yellow, golden idol for whose sake they had crept so near to the

brink of death. Over Traquair swept a panic which terrified him. He must get it. He must seize it and carry it off. They were all against him—Carver, Judith, this McGinty who had come from God knows where. Three of them, and he with his left arm sagging. Carver had him. The bones in his wrist must break in a moment under that fierce grip. Soon McGinty would stumble across the sand and fling his weight into the battle. That would be the end. He must avert it. He must act instantly.

Slewing his body round, he twisted the arm that Carver held, working his way round through the sand until the two taut bodies lay at right angles. Carver's hold was slipping, slipping. With a strength born of desperation Traquair jerked his hand free. He staggered to his feet. Carver was rising drunkenly. Traquair brushed past him and bent swiftly. When he stood upright again he held something in his arms. Too late Carver shouted. Too late McGinty charged. The flying figure went by, heading for the darkness of the woods.

On, on, on, with feet that dragged leadenly and a heart that pounded like a beaten drum. This was the way animals felt when they were hunted, then. He guessed something was broken inside him. Why else should he be spitting blood every dozen yards? About his feet the lianas clung, threatening to throw him. Once he tumbled and fell headlong into a mass of jasmine flowers. The heavy scent brought back to him the flowers he had crushed in his hands a few hours earlier, when he had stood on the shore, a conqueror, dreaming of Judith. He plunged on through the darkness.

Footsteps . . .

He glanced over his shoulder. Someone was running through the trees behind him. There was no time to rest, no chance to fling himself down until his tortured heart should beat evenly again. The thing in his arms was heavy, heavy as a dead man. He held it closer, clutching at it with his wet hands.

A clearing in the trees showed straight ahead. But he did not run across the empty space. In the middle lay a fallen trunk. It looked—it looked like a man. Nicode had looked like that, so still, so straight. Traquair skirted the open place,

keeping in the shadows, turning away to the darkness once more.

He was in the tangled undergrowth. The creepers put out their hands to grasp him. The prickly *tui-tui* ripped through his shirt. Perhaps if he kept still the pursuer would lose him. He stopped, leaning for support against the ghostly stem of a palm that rose behind him. Peering through the latticework of the bushes he saw Carver cross the moonlit space, and halt undecided.

CARVER cast up his head and listened. Which way had Traquair gone? It was odd that he should have disappeared so suddenly. Hark, was that a sound to the right? He listened intently. All was still. It occurred to him that he made a fine target, standing there in the moonlight. He dropped to the ground and lay still, straining his ears for some sound which should betray his enemy. Surely if Traquair were still running he would hear the sound of crashing bushes. But there was nothing. Lifting his head cautiously he strove to pierce the veil that hid Traquair. The damp earth was cool against his sweating body. He was out of sight of the beach, where McGinty waited lest Traquair should double in his tracks. He would make for the *Amaranth* without a doubt, as a wolf makes for its lair.

To his left something moved. He caught his breath, watching a black shadow that moved jerkily on the grass. There came a shuffling grunting noise, and an island pig, a lean, hungry thing, hove into view. Carver lay down again, his ears alert. Most likely the presence of the brute meant that Traquair was not that side of the clearing. These pigs are easily scared. Had a man rushed past a moment or so ago the animal would have fled with squeals that could be heard for half a mile. Carver turned to the right and began to work his way towards the dense mass of foliage that stood so dark and secret, hiding its perils from his searching eyes. He reached the outermost shrub and lay still again. Ahead of him was a stifled sound. It was as if someone were choking back a cough. He waited. There it was again. A twig snapped. He rose to his feet and began to fight his way through the undergrowth.

Traquair heard him coming. He felt for

his gun. Surely he had reloaded after the fight with Poldhu. He took aim at the black figure that came towards him with groping hands. There was a flash. Carver dropped on his hands and knees. There was no time to lose. His gun spat back through the darkness. The shot went wide. It was too dark for shooting, he decided. He thrust his gun into his belt again and stood upright. Traquair's shirt showed a white patch among the bushes near a tall palm. Carver spat on his hands and went forward.

But when he reached the palm Traquair was far ahead, crashing through the undergrowth, running madly, blindly. He was veering to the left. Carver, in hot pursuit of the leaping figure, saw that soon they would reach that open space where the fallen palm lay. He turned sharply, racing to outstrip his enemy by a short cut. Ah, there was Traquair, staggering out into the clear moonlight. Ever and again he looked over his shoulder, and then stumbled on. Across the grass went Carver with great loping strides.

Traquair saw him. He turned like a goaded beast and lurched forward to meet him. Then he stopped, standing astride the Dreaming God, and braced himself to meet the last onslaught.

They fought it out there in the clearing among the palms. This time there was no thought of gun or knife. The thresh of bare fists went on. Fair hair and dark hair mingled as they bent one towards the other in a last desperate struggle for mastery. They fought heavily, both of them now at the point of exhaustion. Their weary arms rose and fell slackly. Traquair was coughing incessantly. Do what he would he could not stem the red torrent that welled inside his throat. He lurched forward and felt Carver's arms meet around his chest. The touch of the slippery flesh roused him. That wound, that wound that had been Poldhu's last effort, was doing him in. His scrabbling fingers found Carver's neck and then his eyes. He heard a shriek, and saw Carver stagger back, his hands pressed to his face. Blind? No such damned luck. Here he was again, lunging forward across the silvered grass.

He leaped and Traquair felt himself sinking back. He hit out, but his blows met the empty air. Down he went, fighting furiously, heedless now of the racked sinews

in his left arm. In his ears was a rushing sound like the beating of waves in a storm. Above the noise he could hear Carver shouting . . .

Slowly the agonized motions of Traquair's arms ceased. Carver's hands relaxed. He stood up, conqueror at last. How many men had he avenged that night?

He turned and gathered the Dreaming God into his arms. Then he set his face towards the lagoon and went rocking down the path that led between the trees.

But Traquair lay still.

CHAPTER XX

THE SONG OF THE REEF

ON THE shore McGinty and Judith waited. Around them clustered the Kanakas, curious, afraid, aware that a tragedy was being enacted before their eyes. Only one man would return from those dark woods. Who would it be?

For what seemed hours they waited. Presently McGinty began to pace up and down, his gun ready. If Traquair tried to put off and get aboard the *Amaranth* he would drop him before he reached the water's edge. Judith was sitting by the fire, her knees drawn up to her chin, her eyes staring straight before her. A game little devil, thought McGinty. Some girls would be raising Cain and chucking themselves down on the sand to howl, but not she. Hell, no! She was the goods. As he passed her, he stopped.

"Don't you worry," he said. "This just had to happen. I guess Carver'll come out all right."

She nodded. He patted her shoulder in rough consolatory fashion, and turned again to watch for a flying figure that might come out of the darkness. But he watched in vain.

The Kanakas had caught a rock cod that day, a fierce brute fifteen feet long. They had cut him up and were roasting him at their fires. Now and again one of them moved silently to turn a piece so that it might cook evenly. The smell of the spiced leaves in which it was wrapped mingled with the scent of burning wood. In the lagoon the drowned stars shone. The moon was high, a round, yellow Chinese lantern in the velvet sky.

A shot, and then another.

Judith sprang to her feet, quivering. McGinty stood stock still, his ears cocked for the next sound. Nothing came. The Kanakas whispered together, pointing half fearfully to the trees, as though urging each other to go forward. But no one moved. McGinty came across to Judith.

"Guess one of 'em's gone. Better stand by just in case——"

The air was tense with fear and expectation. What had happened in the darkness? McGinty said curtly, "Stand still. I'm goin' to see what's up."

Judith caught him by the arm.

"No, don't go. If it should be Traquair that comes back——"

"Well?"

"Anything might happen to you in there," said Judith desperately. "If you go, I'm coming too. I'm not going to be left here alone."

"You can't come."

They argued fiercely. The sound of a faint shouting in the distance silenced them.

"Aw, quit that row," McGinty adjured the chattering Kanakas. "You all keep all same quiet, you listen. Damn yer hides, shut up!"

The far off shouting ceased, swallowed up in the night. A breeze was rising, and the palm trees began their ghostly swaying. All the thousand sounds that lurk in the night wind began their eerie whispering. McGinty stood undecided. If he went in among the trees and missed his quarry, Judith might fall to Traquair. Who could say which man had conquered? Maybe he'd better stay with Judith . . .

She stood there, listening, trying to distinguish the sounds which the wind had set busy. Surely she heard the crackling of bushes, the sound of feet, as a man strode through the undergrowth? The Kanakas were drinking coco-wine, and the heady smell rose rank in her nostrils.

"'Strewth, one of 'em's coming," said McGinty.

Plainly now they heard the distant sound of a man's progress through the woods. Someone was coming, with slow, dragging steps that halted and stumbled and came on again, as though the walker set his teeth and toiled grimly on. Through the trees came a gleam of a white shirt. The moonlight showed them a dim figure that lurched down the path, bearing something in his

arms. Through McGinty's nostrils the breath whistled hard. He dropped on one knee and prepared to take aim. A stillness like death fell over the Kanakas.

It was broken by a shrill scream from Kukeke.

"Kahiva! Kahiva!"

HE BEGAN to run across the beach, McGinty at his heels. Carver stumbled in the sand and fell headlong. He lay there like a log. They lifted him up and bore him to the fire. Still in his arms he held the Dreaming God, nor could they take it from his vicelike grip. The Kanakas pressed forward excitedly. All the air seemed alive with dark, eager faces and flashing teeth as they began the song of the killer. Higher and higher floated the pure voices, raised in triumph. Tarakawa had killed Polidu, their master. Now Tarakawa himself had been vanquished by Kahiva. Sing, then, in praise of the avenger. McGinty regarded them wrathfully.

"You get water all same damn quick," he roared at them. "Kahiva all same hurt, suppose you not get water, all same die."

Kukeke snatched up a gourd and ran to the stream. Carver lay with shut eyes. McGinty tugged out a flask and forced open the closed lips. The burning liquid crept down to Carver's vitals and stung him into consciousness. He opened his eyes.

"Judith," he said.

She came and knelt beside him. He raised his hand and touched her hair.

"He's—dead."

She caught his hand in hers. From McGinty came strange oaths expressive of satisfaction. Kukeke had brought the water. Between them they attended to Carver's wounds. Judith took the Dreaming God from him and set it on the sand. Its coverings had gone and the stark gold gleamed in the moonlight. The Kanakas gathered round in a wide circle of respectful admiration. The boldest among them dared not lay a finger on it. Only McGinty frowned at it.

"That blasted idol," he said, as he tied a piece of rag round Carver's forearm. "Chuck it in the sea, that's what I say. It's at the bottom of all the things that have happened. It's cursed, I believe. Them Chinks, they're a nasty lot. Like as not they said bad words over it. Lord,

Carver, I thought I'd never make that openin'. Kukeke here, he got us in. We should have been in at midday, only we stopped."

"Why?"

"We found Poldhu."

Judith locked up.

"Where is he? Oh, what did Traquair—What happened, and where is the *Wolf*? Where did you find Poldhu?"

"Dead beside his own mast," said McGinty. "So it was Traquair's work, then. I thought it looked like it. Well, they're both gone. Carver, I reckon that left thumb's strained. Does that hurt? Well, then, it is strained."

The cleansing and bandaging were finished at last. Carver rose and walked stiffly up and down. His head was clearing. The pain of his wounds mattered not at all. It was drowned, lost, swallowed up in the sensation of victory. He lifted his head and looked across the lagoon. The *Kestrel* and the *Amaranth* showed like ghost ships, rocking gently under the caress of the wind.

"We'll put out at dawn," said McGinty. "Tell you, I'll be glad to see the last of this perishin' place. See here, what about—what about—him?"

He jerked his thumb over his shoulder towards the woods.

"What do you mean?"

"Traquair. After all, he's a white, ain't he? Somehow it don't seem exactly right to leave him here. Soon as we've gone, the Kanakas—well, do I have to say what they'll do?"

He looked round on the dark faces.

"Guess they ain't quite forgot the taste of long pig," he said.

Carver nodded. It was no use burying Traquair. As soon as the *Kestrel* sailed, the Kanakas would have him above ground again. Carver knew something of the devilish practices that still live in the farther islands.

"What are we going to do with the *Amaranth*?"

"Shove him aboard and set her afire," said McGinty. "That'll settle things."

So in the early dawn they went through the waking woods to the clearing among the trees. Traquair came down the path and across the beach in their arms. For the last time he went aboard the *Amaranth*, and lay on deck, a stiff, twisted figure with

eyes that would not shut. Judith, watching from the shore, felt a swift, strange pity for the dead. The Kanakas lined the water's edge. They saw the hurrying figures on the ship rushing here and there. In the thin light of dawn the shadows showed sharp and distinct. The *Amaranth* stood gallantly with all sails set. She tugged at her anchor, as she had tugged on many a blue morning, impatient for the open sea. McGinty opened the hatches. The Kanakas scuttled away like rats. They clambered into the waiting catamarans and paddled off to a safe distance. McGinty waited till a thin wisp of smoke crept up the companion and wreathed itself like a scarf about the mainmast. Then he swung over the side, and left Traquair alone on board.

They waited ashore until the blazing mass burnt down to the water's edge. All that remained of the proud *Amaranth* was a charred hulk with one bare blackened mast that showed dark against the cloudless sky. The Kanakas were wailing the death song, a minor chant that rose and fell with inexpressible sadness. Overhead the gulls wheeled. On the hot white sand, where Carver had placed him, the Dreaming God stood, his lips curved in ineffable, smiling triumph, his closed eyes guarding still the secret of his dreams.

II

THEY got the *Kestrel* out to sea through the narrow opening. Kukeke stood in the bows and moved his arms, directing the helmsman as he had done before. In the stern stood Judith, looking for the last time at the secret lagoon. Under the burnished sky it lay as blue and as still as heaven. On shore the Kanakas waved mournful farewell. The sound of their voices came sweet and shrill on the clear air. Carver came to Judith where she stood.

"Praise God we've come out of it alive," he told her. "It's an evil place, for all its beauty. Like a jewel in a poisoned ring. Poldhu was clever to choose a spot like this."

He glanced at McGinty, sweating at the tiller, eyes fixed on the lithe brown body of Kukeke. Judith held her breath as they slid through the narrow opening with the sheer rock towering on either side. Already

a fresher breeze from the open sea was blowing about her, dispelling the horror which hung in the heavy, scented air of Parawa. The tumbling waves snapped at the *Kestrel's* coaming. All around the reefs waited, hiding under the sea, their hungry arms outstretched for their prey. McGinty's brown hands never relaxed their grip of the tiller until the ship was a good mile beyond the furthest reef. At last he stood up, shouting to a Kanaka to take over. They put her about until she headed north for Waihiti. Slowly, slowly, the secret island of Parawa grew dim on the horizon. They passed the *Wolf*, but McGinty refused to take her in tow. They would report her derelict when they reached Waihiti. They raced by her and Pohete waved his hands in salutation. She looked gaunt and lonely, with that peculiar, listless look that comes over a deserted ship.

"She's well built," said Carver, surveying her with a critical eye.

"She may be. But blow me if I'll take the risk of towing her. Let her alone."

On towards the north went the *Kestrel*. The westering sun sent its slanting rays across the water and made for them a track of gold. Parawa sank into the sea. From the *Kestrel's* galley arose a good smell as Pohete busied himself with the evening meal. At dusk he called to Carver that all was ready. They went below into the light of the swinging lamp.

"Do you remember supper on the *Nancy Q*?" said Judith.

McGinty laughed.

"Hell, that was a game! 'Member how I came down and found you and Carver sitting like a couple of mummies? I reckon you'd have plenty to say if you was alone now, hey?"

"I've not forgotten," said Carver. "Judith, do you bear me a grudge for the rotten way I acted then?"

She shook her head. A strange fear crept about his heart. Did she still care for him, after the things that had happened? He bent forward anxiously. Her eyes answered him. McGinty saw the look. He grinned and launched a jocular. The *Kestrel* lurched unexpectedly, and his pork coasted onto the floor. Amid much blasphemy he got down to retrieve it. Judith's hand shot across the table. Carver lifted it to his lips. McGinty,

watching out of the corner of his eye, proceeded to chase the pork still further across the floor. Very red in the face, he captured it at last and replaced it on his plate with much gravity.

Supper ended, and McGinty turned to go on deck.

"Wait a bit," said Carver.

He went to the chest in which he had locked the Dreaming God and lifted it out. Pushing aside the cloth he set it carefully on the table. Its golden beauty filled the cabin.

"Drown it," advised McGinty. "Sell it, give it away, put it up the spout. If it hadn't been for that image, there'd be three men alive that are dead."

Carver went to the figure. His great hands moved over the shining body until they stopped at the golden rose, held so carelessly in the golden hand. Gently he thrust his finger into the heart of the flower. The closed eyelids slid back.

"Gawd!" said McGinty. "Diamonds, blue diamonds!"

He drew nearer, staring down into those eyes where a thousand fires flashed.

"Now you know the reason I wanted it," Carver was saying. "Hell, but we're in luck that neither Poldhu nor Traquair found the secret. Did they, I wonder? Well, if they did, they've left the stones untouched."

McGinty burst into frenzied calculations. Unheeded, he paced excitedly about the cabin. And wherever he moved, the flashing eyes followed him. The Dreaming God was awake at last.

III

LEFROY came up from Flanders Island with guano. The longboat of the *Concepcion* shot through the gap in the reef into the Waihiti lagoon. Hogan, shading his eyes, went out to the beach. After him came Morton and Bill Parsons, the latter in an excessively bibulous condition. He hung tightly to Morton's arm, striving mightily to walk straight.

Lefroy came ashore and waved to Hogan.

"'Lo Hogan. Gee, it's good to see a white again. Hello, Morton. Why, I've not seen you for—how many years is it?"

"Hooray," said Bill Parsons. "Hersh a nische thing! Ol' friends—ver' ol' friends—drop of Scotch, Hogan, on this mos' ausp

—ausish — ausp — dammit — aushishus 'casion."

"Get out of it," said Hogan tersely, tripping him into the sand. "Come on up, Lefroy, and have a drop of something. You're a bit early this trip, ain't you? Reckon you didn't expect to see Morton."

Lefroy grunted. They had been struggling against a head wind all night and he was tired. He did not speak again until he sat in the cool darkness of the store with a full tumbler before him. Then he fixed his little dark eyes on Morton.

"Someone's been looking for you."

"Where?"

"On Flanders Island."

"Traquair, eh?"

"Yes. And someone else."

"Who?"

"Ever knew a man called Nicode?"

"Nicode? Sailing with Traquair?"

"Yes. The *Amaranth* came in a few weeks ago with Traquair and Nicode. Traquair swore you'd come that way with something he wanted. Had the damned impudence to suppose I'd lend you the *Concepcion* so you could make a getaway."

"Where's Traquair now?"

"Couldn't say."

"Nicode's still with him, I suppose?"

"Nicode's on Flanders Island."

"The hell he is! What's he doin' there?"

"Lying in six foot of earth," retorted Lefroy grimly, "and when I go down to Amanu, I'm going to lay information against Traquair. You and him and Poldhu——"

"Did Traquair do him in?"

"He did. And Nicode's not the first, I'll bet my Sam."

A silence fell on the company. Lefroy lifted his glass with a curt "Here's how," to Hogan. Morton played nervously with his straggling mustache.

"You unloading today?" said Hogan to Lefroy.

Lefroy nodded.

"Might as well get on with it when the sun's a bit lower."

For a long time the three of them sat there in a curious unfriendly silence, broken presently by the shambling advent of Parsons. He smiled vacantly on the company, and waved his hand seawards with such violence that he grabbed at the doorpost for support.

"Boat comin' in," he announced after two false starts. "Long—hic—long way out." Hogan went to the door and shaded his eyes.

"It's the *Kestrel*," he said. "So Carver and McGinty's come back. I wonder now—whether Traquair——"

"Go on," said Morton.

But Hogan said no more. He watched anxiously until the *Kestrel's* dingey was lowered. One—two figures— Yes, it was Carver all right, and then—Judith? He waited open-mouthed until the boat scraped the sand and Carver sprang out. He was bandaged about the arms and showed signs of a fight. Hogan swallowed back the questions that trembled on his lips.

"Morton's here. Guess you know about him. Runs with Traquair and Poldhu."

"Then he runs alone," said Carver. "Those two will never get up from their beds again."

"You mean?"

"Yes."

"Hogan," came Judith's voice, "oh, Hogan, aren't you glad to see me? Has the new gramophone record come?"

"Bless yer heart, Ju," said Hogan, lifting her in his brawny arms, "it's a sight for sore eyes you are. Come on up, all of you. Lefroy's in from Flanders Island." He set Judith on the sand and looked at her intently.

"You're altered," he said abruptly. "You're different about the eyes. What have you seen, Judith?"

"Things that she'll remember all her life," said Carver. "But they're over now. It's past. Hogan, when's the parson coming over from Patterson?"

"Due any time now. Why? Thinkin' of learnin' your catechism?"

Carver shook his head. Hogan became aware of McGinty's amusement.

"Don't glare at me that way," protested McGinty. "I ain't the lucky man. Not but what I'd be rather an improvement on Carver. Only I can't persuade Judith to think so. Well, there, very likely me and a redhead wouldn't get on. I like 'em fair, more peaceful-like. Hogan, ain't that the *Seamew* we passed?"

"Yes. Morton's in."

"Then the sooner he gets out the better," said McGinty. "Parawa! Let him go back there. He can have the whole blamed island to himself."

At the door of the store Lefroy greeted them. Behind him stood Morton. He had heard Carver's name. He knew that here was an enemy of Traquair. He grew a shade paler, as the tall, dark-haired man strode into the room. A tenseness fell on the air. Morton, looking at the rest, had a queer feeling of having his back to the wall. Inside the room they stood so still that the dull booming of the combers on the reef came loud and clear. A parrakeet chattered noisily among the bushes. Somewhere behind the house two Kanakas were quarreling. Their angry voices rose sharply as they wrangled over a fish spear.

Morton backed until he felt the wall behind his shoulders. Carver left the others and came across the floor.

"You're Morton?"

"Yes."

"From Parawa?"

"What does——"

"From Parawa?"

"Look here—hell!"

In Carver's hand lay a gun.

"Put 'em up, Morton. You're going to tell me the truth. You're from Parawa?"

"Yes," said Morton sullenly, stretching his hands above his head.

"A good many ships lost around Parawa, aren't there?"

"How do I know?"

"I suppose you and Poldhu and Traquair divided the swag, eh?"

No answer.

"We've come from there," said Carver slowly, "and before we left, the Kanakas took us up on the cliff and showed us a very pretty bit of work. How many ships have headed for Parawa instead of Port Edward Island, I wonder? Anyway, there won't be any more mistakes. When you get back you can go up and have a look at what we made of that decoy light. No one's going to hinder you."

Morton shifted uneasily.

"Did you hear what I said? No one."

"Where's Poldhu?"

"You can go and look for him. His ship's derelict outside Parawa."

"Traquair—where's he?"

"He's with Poldhu."

Carver stood back and glanced out at the lagoon. Then he turned to the cowering Morton.

"You know what the punishment is for wrecking. You know what McCarthy got

when they found out about his game at Degas. If I thought you were anything better than a poor fool I'd tie you up and take you down to Amanu. The wind's rising. You'd better go now. Get out."

With his hands high Morton shuffled sullenly from the room. Carver followed him down to the beach.

"And to think," said Lefroy, watching them, "to think it should enter Traquair's head that I'd let that skunk make a get-away in the *Concepcion*. Where is Traquair?"

"That's a dangerous question," said McGinty. "Why do you want to know?"

"I'm going to lay information against him when I get to Amanu. He killed Nicode."

McGinty regarded him steadily.

"I shouldn't trouble to do that," he said.

Lefroy rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"It's like that, is it? And—Poldhu?"

"I shouldn't trouble about him neither," said McGinty. "The *Wolf's* lyin' derelict off Parawa. Morton will find her when he gets back. But he won't find Poldhu."

"JUDITH," said Carver, "Hogan says the reverend will be over from Patterson any time now. When he comes he'll—Judith, you will marry me?"

He glanced at her anxiously.

"You know, there have been things that are rather—rather rotten in my life. I'm not denying them. If you want to hear about them——"

She put her firm hand to his lips.

"You can cut it all right out," she told him. "If it comes to that, well did you know about my father? I didn't, till Hogan told me. My mother fell in love with another man, a trapeze artist in the show. My father was jealous. He killed him when my mother died."

There was a long silence. The sun slid down the incarnadined sky. Across the lagoon crept the long shadows of the palms. The sky deepened, showing the first faint prick of the thrusting stars. Far to the south a black speck moved. It was the *Seamew*, with Morton aboard, hurrying away while the going was still good.

Judith and Carver paced slowly along the beach. Kukeke and Pohete, stretched by a newly lit fire, waved their hands in greeting as the two passed.

"We don't have to stay here," said Carver with an effort. "If you like we can go to New York—or there's London—Paris."

"Not for me," returned Judith. "You and McGinty can go if you like. When you come back to Waihiti you'll find me waiting. After that——"

"But we'll be rich," he said. "Judith, there'll be money, more than we want. Shall you be content with the Islands?"

"For a long time," said Judith. "Until——until——"

He caught her by the shoulders and turned her to him. The last rays of the sun fell on her face, grown suddenly rosy and shy of him.

"Well?"

"Until you're tired of me, or we've got to think of someone else."

She clung to him, and he felt the quick, uneven beating of her heart against his own. Suddenly she broke from him and ran along the beach. Her light laughter came back to him, borne on the night wind that blew in from the sea. Hogan, coming out to admire the sunset, watched the flying figures. He marked the chase, the capture, the sudden stillness. He beckoned to McGinty.

"Young blood, eh?"

McGinty grinned.

"You and me have had our time," he said.

"What are you going to do with the Dreaming God?" Hogan asked.

"We're makin' Tahiti and then New York. We must get the best price we can. Those diamonds——"

"After that?"

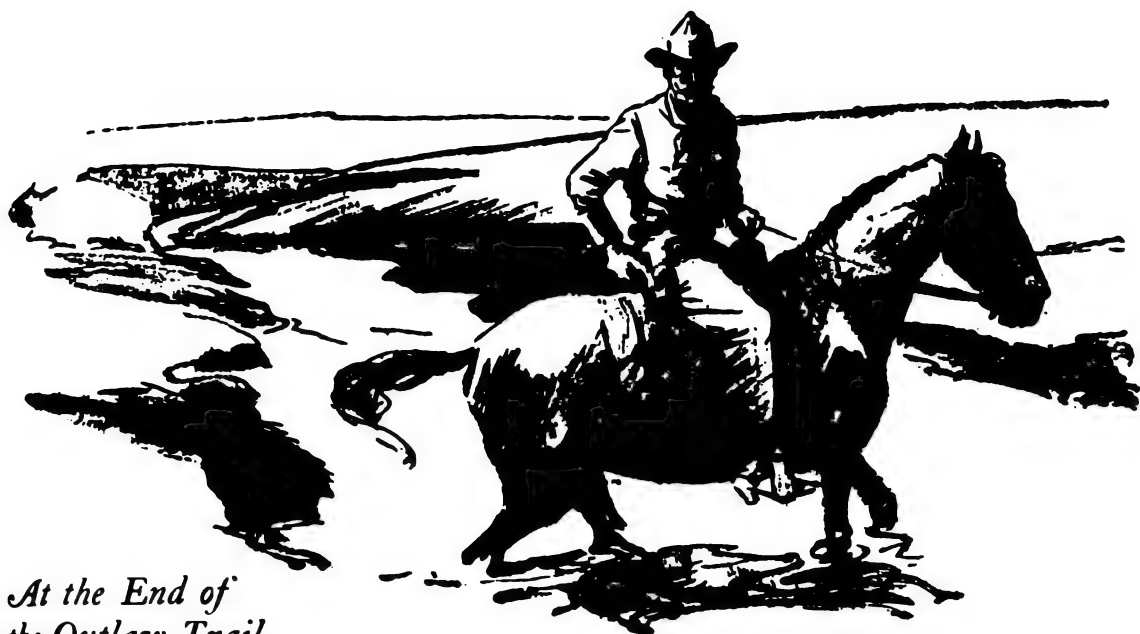
"The South for me always," returned McGinty. "Those two—well—they'll come back as well, I think. It's all right to go North and see the sights and the shows for a bit. An' then one day the south wind blows, and you've got to come back."

Hogan nodded.

"That's so," he said. "Well, come on in."

Far down the beach the Pacific night closed about the lovers. From the Kanakas by their fires rose low, passionate singing that throbbed through the scented air. Beyond the lagoon the riding light of the *Kestrel* winked and beckoned. The eternal song of the reef sounded, like the long roll of distant drums. Carver bent his head until he found Judith's lips.

"I love you," he said.



*At the End of
the Outlaw Trail*

The FEUD AT SANDY FORD

By IRA D. MULLINAX

JOGGING down the sandy road in the cool of a late September evening, Sheriff Joe Austin tingled to the roots of his hair with that peculiar, hard thrill which only the manhunter knows.

For twenty years manhunting had been Joe Austin's business. Long and profitable had been his hard apprenticeship as deputy, a schooling in which he had learned to chase—and sometimes capture—outlaws as desperate as any that ever rode and plundered along the Kansas-Oklahoma border. It had ground into him an unyielding hardness toward all who broke the law. He had come to pursue them as instinctively and unfeelingly as a grayhound chases a coyote. First and last, Joe Austin felt, he owed loyalty and service only to that sacred thing, the Law. Pity or mercy toward those accused of crime had no place in the make-up of an officer who dealt with doers of violence and shedders of blood. Now that at last he had been elected sheriff, he felt a renewed sense of duty.

Only three weeks before, a train had been robbed at a water tank stop and the conductor wantonly murdered. The leader of

the gang was of medium height and stout build, the express messenger said; he had oily black hair and a neatly cropped mustache. The description was almost the same as saying "Link Means", as cool and desperate as any outlaw that ever pulled trigger. Moreover, the bandit leader had worked with impatience and haste. Or perhaps it was only the enthusiasm of an artist to do his work well and quickly. "Git a wiggle on," he had repeatedly commanded as he and his pals looted the express car. A favorite expression of Link Means', the officer had been told.

All these last three weeks Sheriff Joe and his deputies had ridden hot upon the outlaw's trail. But catching Link Means was only one of the major problems which now engaged the doughty officer's attention. There was also the Barlow gang. Cattle rustling and horse stealing, with occasional hold-ups of isolated cow-town stores; those were the usual items in the long list of charges against them. Recently, however, Speck Barlow, the leader, had shot Mark Hall, keeper of the general store, in a hold-up at Mullville. That added no little to

the seriousness of the situation Sheriff Joe Austin faced.

Speck and his half dozen followers usually hung out at ranches of shady reputation, whose owners were suspected of profiting from the gang's cattle rustling. While the Barlows had not yet reached the plane of robbing banks and trains, they had abundant nerve. Taking them, if cornered, would mean facing hot lead as long as a single outlaw retained sufficient strength to pull a trigger.

For the past three months there had been open hostility between the Means and Barlow gangs. Both Link and Speck had been attracted by the smiles of a ranchman's pretty, wayward daughter, and burning jealousy had flared up like a prairie fire before the wind. This had been followed swiftly by disaster for the Barlow band when bringing a wagonload of whisky from Missouri into the Indian country. United States marshals had overtaken them, captured and destroyed the precious liquor. Shots were exchanged, but the rum runners escaped in the dark. Since then they had been lying low, hidden at obscure little ranches or concealed in the huts of Indian allies far back in the hills.

"Link Means set the law on our trail, hopin' to put me away so he'd have clear sailin' with a certain piece of calico," growled Speck Barlow. "But I'll git him fer that—him an' his whole damn crew."

With characteristic loyalty his pals had backed him up; with equal fervor Link Means and his followers accepted the challenge. Through mutual acquaintances each had sent the other lurid threats, and now the bitter, truceless war between the gangs needed only a meeting to bring about battle and bloodshed.

Sheriff Joe Austin earnestly hoped the two bands would meet and shoot it out. The sooner, the better; it would mean less work for him and his hard driven deputies. Still, getting the Barlows and running down Link's followers could be undertaken when graver matters were disposed of. Just now, because of the recent robbery and murder, public indignation was bitterest against Link. Trailing down Link, therefore, was the thing for immediate attention. That would be a bright red feather in the sheriff's official cap.

"Link ought by rights to be hung," growled Sheriff Joe as his horse rounded

the base of a brush covered sandhill. "Anyhow, he's sure to be jugged fer a good long stretch, along with his gang an' the Barlows."

It was a soul-felt satisfaction to reflect that he was a sprocket of no little importance in the machinery which would deal out stern justice to the outlaws. But there was nothing metallic or machinelike about Sheriff Joe Austin. He fairly hummed with life and vitality; it thrust itself on one's attention in the suppleness of his muscles, the lightness of all his movements. There was something talonlike about his hands, his nose was a beak between two hawkish eyes, his jaw long and pointed like that of a hound. When he grinned his thin lips showed most of his teeth, the long, narrow "eye teeth" unpleasantly prominent. His forehead sloped back to a crown of close-cropped reddish hair, his neck was too thick for the size of his long, narrow head. "Half hawk and half hound" he was called by those who had reason to fear his fang and talon.

With bib overalls covering his corduroy trousers, a black sateen shirt and a battered brown fedora hat, he had a most unsherifflike appearance. Except for two well kept .45's, he wore nothing suggestive of his official position. Almost everybody knew Sheriff Joe Austin, and, with those who happened not to, he had, when necessary, a thoroughly convincing way of proving his identity. Because of his completely hard-boiled attitude toward all who broke the law, his tenure of office seemed everlastingly secure in a section where the swift riding outlaw still makes certain forms of insurance good business.

AS HE reached Sandy Ford across the Cimarron River, he drew rein cautiously. It was well to be wary when on the trail of such as Link Means, and for years caution had been the sheriff's carefully cultivated habit. Link couldn't be anywhere near the ford just now, however, and Sheriff Joe rode his horse into the ruddy stream where the animal sipped indifferently at the slightly salty water.

Twenty miles back Sheriff Joe's deputies had found an abandoned flivver, one that showed signs of hard usage. Hoofprints in the soil near by indicated the outlaw had taken to the saddle. A horse could make fairly good time through the hills where

motor travel was impossible. Moreover, it was by no means safe to try crossing the "quicky" Cimarron in a car; its treacherous sands had claimed many a victim. Horses might be driven back and forth across the stream, or, at a narrow place, even a man might tramp about barefoot to settle the sand and make it safe for the passage of a heavy vehicle. But with no horses to be had and with officers hot on his trail, Link Means would have time to do neither. Another urgent reason for his sudden change from auto seat to saddle.

"He'll be sure to come a-horseback in the good old fashioned way," the sheriff reasoned. "A horse won't make hardly any noise in this sand, while a car would be a-poppin' like a gun. Besides, it's the only good crossin' in miles."

If the officer's plans worked out as expected, Link Means undoubtedly must cross here tonight as he fled out of the hills to escape Deputy Dick Barnes and his men. Cunning and cool as any that ever drew boot on was Dick Barnes, a fact that gave his chief a sense of solid satisfaction as he sat there on his horse in the middle of the stream. Dick knew every tree and hollow in all the black jack section, where Link had been seen only two days before. He would drive the outlaw this direction as surely as a rancher might head a steer through a stockyards' gate. Waiting on the opposite side of the ford, Sheriff Joe would have only to step into the road with his gun and the fox would be caught. He laughed softly to himself, the thing seemed such a "dead mortal cinch."

Downstream to the left the water murmured caressingly, as if utterly unmindful of all the tragedies its ancient banks had seen enacted. Upstream a long bar of yellowish red sand extended out into the river, sand the wind sometimes whipped into blinding clouds when winter and spring struggled for mastery of the plain that lay beyond the shallow banks. The bar gave Sandy Ford its name. Tonight it lay quiet enough, its redness softened into white by the rays of a crescent moon.

Sheriff Joe dug a heel into his horse's side and urged him toward the bank ahead. He drew rein impatiently as a sudden gust of wind whipped his hat off and into the water. With exasperating swiftness it sailed down the stream while horse and rider plunged after it in splashing pursuit. With-

out a second's warning, the horse sank like a leaden mount. Head and ears went out of sight, the water swirled about the rider's waist. With all his strength the horse plunged forward, snorting the water from his nostrils and emitting that indescribable scream which only a frightened horse can. Out of the deep, narrow pool into which he had dropped, the terrified animal half swam, half leaped, only to sink belly deep in the sand, plunge clumsily and sink again. "Quicksand!"

Sheriff Joe jerked his feet out of the stirrups and pushed himself clear of the saddle. Snorting and floundering, freed of his burden, the horse now struggled on toward the shore, his legs sinking deep into the treacherous sand at every jump. Putting forth every ounce of his strength, he at last reached firm ground, panting like a racer at the end of a furious heat.

Encumbered as he was with boots, stout clothing and two heavy .45's at his sides, the officer swam with the utmost difficulty. A few desperate strokes and his feet touched bottom. His heart beating high with hope, he started to wade for the shore. A moment more and he would be safe on dry ground again.

Suddenly one foot sank ankle deep into the sand. With an effort he withdrew it, only to feel the other go in almost to the knees. Frantically he pulled and tugged, but the deadly quicksand settled firmly about his boots. Though the water was now but a few inches deep, Sheriff Joe felt it swirling about his hips as his body was steadily sucked down. Soon it became impossible for him to move another inch toward the shore, gripped as he was by the millions of tiny particles that held him, a Gulliver ensnared by countless hordes of infinitesimal Lilliputians.

For five horrible, age long minutes he stood there feeling himself steadily sinking into the sand. No use to cry out for help; there was not a soul within miles. It might be hours before Dick Barnes and his men came along. By that time he would have disappeared beneath the sands, another victim of the treacherous Cimarron.

"Oh well! It'll be all the same a hundred years from now," he muttered resignedly. "Thank goodness there's enough water to drown me before my nose reaches that smotherin' sand—an' I've always heard drowndin' was easy."

By now the water had almost reached his armpits. Only a few minutes more, and then— He turned his face up toward the stars as if in mute appeal for aid; but they responded only in cold, silvery reflections on the water that soon would flow over his grave. He had been taught that prayers are answered and now he folded his hands while his lips began awkwardly to form the long forgotten phrases.

Just then, above the triumphant ripple of the waters, came the sound of rapid hoofbeats on the sandy road.

"It may be Dick Barnes or one of his crowd," he gasped hopefully.

But his hope vanished swiftly as the bubbles at his side when he saw that the horseman was Link Means, the killer. Link stopped his horse on the bank and gazed about cautiously, his hand conveniently close to a holster. Evidently he had no desire to join the long caravan of those whose last ride has been ended by a bullet in the middle of a stream.

Sheriff Joe turned his head for a better view. In the moonlight his white face stood out against the dark background of the water like a stone in the clearness of a brook. Link, who had been scanning the opposite bank, now saw him for the first time. He rested one foot in a stirrup and regarded the officer as indifferently as if he were indeed only a harmless stone.

FOR all his readiness to kill, Link was not of the surly type. No matter how desperate his situation, his rough sense of humor spontaneously displayed itself in broad jokes. He was the kind that would jest with his own executioner as he stepped upon the scaffold. And now, when he saw his implacable pursuer gripped by the sand, with death staring him in the face, raillery rose inevitably to his lips.

"Hello, Sheriff!" he began banteringly. "In swimmin' with yer clo'es on?"

"Only wisht I could swim, Link, but quicksand ain't very good swimmin'. Hat blowed off, an' I got here chasin' it. A few minutes more, an' you won't need to worry 'bout me ever huntin' you any more."

"You certainly put yer foot in it when ye tuck after me this time," laughed the outlaw. "Tough luck, but you're mighty sandy about it."

The water licked Sheriff Joe's thick neck in silent, cruel hunger, the wet sand gripped

him like some ferocious, aqueous monster.

"Hollerin' never helped nobody," he replied gamely.

"Hate to see a game man die like a frog under a steer's hoof, Sheriff. Somehow it don't seem right." But Link's jesting tone belied the sentiment.

Sheriff Joe made no reply. He could hope for no help from Link Means after hounding him toward the gallows. And it wouldn't be right for an officer of the law to accept favors from a bandit and a murderer. Better to die than have tongues wagging and suspicion's finger pointing.

"Dick Barnes an' his crowd is a good two hours behind me," Link chuckled, beaming with satisfaction. "I doubled back through the timber an' throwed 'em off the trail. Purty hard goin' through the sand, but I believe I'll outride 'em if I jest git a wiggle on an' don't hang around here watchin' you croak."

Maddening as this jesting indifference was, it was only to be expected.

"Reckon you'll be glad to stay an' watch me pass out. You won't have long to wait."

"You sure do look like a mighty sick man," grinned Link.

"I'll be right on your trail, if ever I git well."

"Sure ye will, with sworn duty an' public opinion drivin' ye on. But puttin' all that aside, I can't ride off cold-blooded an' leave as nervy a man as you to strangle in quicksand. Somehow it goes ag'in the grain."

The outlaw laughed tauntingly as he saw the water reach Sheriff Joe's chin and watched him slowly sink deeper.

"Don't set there an' kid me about it. The nerviest has got to cash in sometime."

"The world ain't overstocked with game men, Sheriff. We ought to save a few fer samples."

"Dick Barnes an' his men will save you fer a sample, all right. Guess you'll be glad to tell 'em how I come to git offa yer trail."

"Can't say as I will. I got nothin' agin you personally fer trailin' me up. That's what a sheriff is fer. If we met somewhere an' shot it out, I reckon I'd lose no sleep over puttin' a bullet through you. But this is a different thing—you ain' got a chance ag'in quicksand."

Sheriff Joe spat out a mouthful of the brackish water. He beat the surface desperately in a wild attempt to keep from going deeper, churning the stream into foam

with his arms. Two minutes more and he would be forever beyond reach of the outlaw's heartless taunts. Now Link was grinning devilishly and unfastening the rope at his saddle horn with a tantalizing suggestion of possible aid.

"Don't kid me no more, Link, near gone as I am."

"Well, good-by, Sheriff," sang out Link, as he spurred his horse into the stream and up the opposite bank.

Suddenly he stopped and turned back, whirling his rope in the air. The sinking man gasped in astonishment.

"Ketch this an' fasten it under yer arms. Git a wiggle on!" Link commanded as the loop struck the water.

Desperately Sheriff Joe seized the rope.

"You're only twenty feet from shore. Fix the noose while I manage things here."

Link swung down from his saddle, hurriedly tightened girths and lariat. Up the slope he led his horse till the rope stretched taut against the saddle horn.

"Brace yerself fer a hard pull, now!"

The horse moved forward on the firm dry ground.

"Come on, Buck. Git a wiggle on!"

Link slapped him loudly on the rump and the animal dug his toes in like a draught horse.

When the rope tightened about him Sheriff Joe felt his ribs contract as if his chest were being crushed. His breath came in gasps, his eyes and tongue protruded. It seemed as though he were an iron man set in a block of solid lead, so firmly had the quicksand packed about him. Then all at once the terrible pressure gave way. He felt himself dragged through the slush and up the bank like a log snaked out of a boom. As he lay there gasping for air Link Means unbuckled the officer's guns and placed them out of reach beneath a tree, then cut the rope and jerked off the water filled boots.

From the trembling lips came a grateful wheeze: "Mighty white of you, Link. I won't fergit it."

NEVER before had Sheriff Joe Austin spoken like that to a man on whose trail he had ridden. Link grinned at thought of the obligation under which he had placed the implacable officer, but affected indifference by examining his saddle girths.

"We sure done a lot o' gassin', considerin' the close fix you was in," he chuckled, turning around and resting his arms on the saddle.

Sheriff Joe soon was breathing almost normally again, though weak in every limb.

"Thought ye was goin' to keep right on talkin' an' let me drown," he said presently. "Some folks will chatter right along, no matter what."

"Yeh, an' I want to talk some more. Short an' to the point, seein' Dick Barnes an' his bunch is ridin' hard this way."

"Shoot," said Sheriff Joe.

"Well, I've made you lots o' trouble, these last four years. I done some of the things you claim I done, all right, an' some I never. I never done that killin' in the water tank hold-up; never did shoot unless I had to."

Link paused a moment, toying with a wet rope end.

"I was aimin' to leave these parts fer good when you tuck after me this last time. Looks now like I would make it."

"Yeh," drawled the sheriff ironically. "Dick Barnes an' his bunch may ride themselves to death huntin' you."

Puffing at cigarets the two remained silent a moment.

"Then there's that Barlow gang you got to look out fer," the officer resumed, his voice suddenly warm with kindly warning. "But maybe you already know they've been hidin' out lately at Ole Lady Fenton's ranch, only two mile down the river."

"I'll take care o' myself ag'in that pack of petty larceny sneaks," Link replied airily. "Fer's you're concerned, you can't chase me no more tonight, with no guns. An' if Dick an' his crowd don't trap me tonight, you'll never turn yer little ole jail key on me."

"Dick nearly always lands 'em when he starts," the officer insisted.

Link squinted past a tree at the slowly descending moon.

"Ought to be here 'fore long. Guess you figgered to have me grabbed an' be here waitin'."

"That was my plan, but——"

"Even the best laid plans will sometimes fail. But here's what I started to say: I want to quit this hard ridin' stick-up game. They's a heap o' good reasons, but the best one lives up in Newbrasky. She——"

Link stopped as if embarrassed, then hurriedly rattled on.

"Tell ye a secret, if you won't tell."

"Don't tell me nothin' that can be used ag'in ye, Link Means. Mustn't fergit I'm an officer."

"But even a sheriff can have a heart once in a lifetime."

Sheriff Joe made no answer. Disregarding his warning, Link continued boldly.

"Listen, you law hound. Over at Red Bird Station some punchers is loadin' out a bunch o' steers. I promised to help an' I'm already late, but it's only six mile. I expect to be on board that rattler when she hollers the pull-out signal. An' I'm not ever comin' back—unless I'm brought."

"Lot's o' folks would breathe easier if they was sure you'd gone fer good."

"You needn't resign jest because I'm changin' my business. They'll always be a new crop o' law busters."

"That sure hits the nail on the head."

"Hope ye don't make trouble fer these punchers I'm goin' to help. Hands is scarce, an' they don't know who I am."

"Yeh, I know all that, but what the hell are you drivin' at?"

"This is it: I don't want to miss my own weddin'. Never expect to have but one. Now if you could only keep Dick Barnes off my trail fer three hours——"

"Good lord, Link! Do you know what you're askin'?"

"'T ain't so much, is it?"

"Nothin' but askin' me to break my official oath by helpin' you make a git-away."

"I thought maybe, after what——"

"Didn't I tell ye I'd keep on yer trail if ever I got out o' that quicksand? Did I ask ye fer help?"

"You tempt me to finish what the quicksand nearly done."

"But you won't. Not with Dick Barnes an' his men comin' closer every minute. What you want is a safe git-away."

"An' you begrudge me that, you miserable——"

"Hold on, now, Link. Gratitude's all right. I want to be square all around. But don't you see the fix I'm in?"

The officer's breath came hard, like that of a man in some desperate struggle.

"It must be hell to be sheriff," sneered Link. "You're a dead ringer fer that Officer Javert I read about in one o' them Victor Hugo books the winter I had my leg broke. Big a nut over official duty as you are. But even he didn't have the guts to turn

up Jean Valjean after the old convict had saved his life. He was human, he was; so he went out and drowneded hisself."

"Yeh, I seen it in the movies. Guess I am as bad as ole Javert. An' I'm in exactly his fix. As a man I owe you more than I can ever pay. As an officer I ought to slam you in the jail. If you was me, what would you do?"

"I know it's a hard proposition. I know too that if ever this was told around about me pullin' ye out o' the sand, they would laugh you clean out o' the State."

Sheriff Joe's face blanched paler than the moonlight. Fearless of bullet and steel as he was, the thought of ridicule filled him with unutterable terror.

"I could never hold my head up again," he quavered. "An' my two kids, that think I ketch outlaws as easy as they trap rabbits, I'd never be the same to them. But you ain't the kind to tell it, Link."

"They's lots would be tickled to hear it, an' don't you——"

Six-shooters whanged in the shadows, bullets whined past Link's ears and fanned the sheriff's cheek. Down on the ground, side by side, they flung themselves

Commands were roared out with unprintable epithets. The tone was nasal, penetrating, unmistakably that of Speck Barlow. Other voices were those of Handy Kline and Nosey Neff, two of his nerviest men.

"Hands up!" they shouted.

"An order I never obeyed," yelled Link, firing at a shadowy form. A groan was followed by the falling of something bulky on dry leaves.

"Take one of my .45's, Joe," whispered Link. "You know they're after both of us."

"Link Means, you're a deputy sheriff. For once you can shoot accordin' to law."

Link doubled up with silent laughter.

"Link Means a deputy!" he muttered. "Devil in the pulpit. This sure is rich!"

DUSKY shapes flitted from tree to tree as the outlaws worked forward seeking a more favorable range. Shots from Link and Sheriff Joe, flattened on their bellies behind a log, were answered with flashes on opposite sides as the attackers encircled the spot. Presently a bullet raked Link's horse across the rump. The animal ran snorting through the trees, and down the sandy road.

Minutes passed without another shot. Sheriff Joe lay tense and breathless, his eyes upon an oak that stood out blackly by itself against the sky line. Arms and legs encircled it, working themselves upward with a climbing motion. Another moment and a dark form balanced itself in the fork of the tree, its hand and arm extended.

"Keep down, Link. He's aimin' right fer yer head."

Sheriff Joe pointed his .45 at the tree and pulled the trigger. "Wu-ump!" came the sound of a human body falling flat upon its back.

"You shoot well enough to belong to my gang," Link bantered coolly.

From the opposite direction now came six quick flashes, bullets cutting the leaves from the underbrush. One of them tore through Link's left arm. In a wild frenzy he leaped to his feet and bounded toward the hazel clump from which the flashes came, firing as he ran. He stopped, turned something over and peered down, then scrambled back on hands and knees to Sheriff Joe's side.

"Speck Barlow," he panted. "Got him before he could reload."

For half an hour the siege continued, neither side gaining advantage. Both Link and Sheriff Joe thrust fresh cartridges into their guns. The two remaining outlaws, though wounded, still were able to shoot. Proof of this came quickly when vicious flashes split the darkness, answered instantly by shots from Link and Sheriff Joe.

"Hey, you!" came a sudden command. "Cut out that shootin'. We got you plum surrounded."

Deputy Dick Barnes sang it out in a confident tone.

"All right, Dick, it's me," Sheriff Joe answered. "Right over here by this log."

"Come an' help me 'fore I bleed to death," begged a piteous voice from the shadows.

"I'm hit too, an' my last ca'tridge gone," came a groan from beneath a tree.

"All right, boys, come on," ordered Deputy Dick. "But hands up, ever'body. We'll take no chances in the dark."

Link rolled over on the grass and felt for Sheriff Joe's water soaked weapons. With his own remaining gun he handed them to the officer.

"I'll undeputy-ize myself," he whispered. "It'll look better fer you."

"That's exactly what I don't want," was the firm reply. "You'll see why purty soon."

Guns out, Deputy Dick and his possemen came forward cautiously. As they reached the prostrate figures matches were lit, pale faces scanned.

"Speck Barlow!" exclaimed Deputy Dick, peering down at the grim, spotted visage. A few steps farther on, another match flared redly into the quivering features of Nosey Neff. As the flame burned out his last breath came in a little tired flutter.

"And if here ain't Handy Kline!"

"Got a slug straight through the lungs," wheezed Handy, passing a palm across his bloody lips. "Fer God's sake, Dick, help me git to a doctor."

"We'll see about it purty soon. Lemme talk to Joe first. Joe! O, Joe! Where on earth are you at?"

"Waitin' till you got around to me. Takin' no more chances than you are, here in the dark."

"Three o' these birds in one night. Not a bad piece of work," purred Deputy Dick commendingly. "You ain't hit, are ye, Joe?"

"I'm all right," his chief assured him, coming forward as more matches were lit, Link trailing at his heels.

"An you got Link Means into the bargain!" exclaimed the astonished deputy. "They'll run you fer gov'ner now! How did you put it all acrost?"

"Maybe Handy er Link can tell it better," Sheriff Joe grunted modestly. "But Link's got a damn bad arm. Let's fix that first," he added, cutting away Link's red-dened shirtsleeve and tearing off the other for a bandage. The rude emergency dressing finished, he turned toward Handy Kline.

"Want to tell how this happened? But recollect it may be used ag'in ye," he warned conscientiously.

"Looks like I can't pull through," gasped Handy, twisting in agony on the ground. "Might as well tell what I know."

While one officer started a fire for light, another ran to the river, returning with a wet handkerchief and a hatful of water. Quickly, the outlaw's wound was bathed his hot brow swathed in the cooling cloth. Soothed and reassured, Handy readily told his story.

"Friends kep' us posted on all you was doin', told us you was chasin' Link Means toward Sandy Ford. We been hidin' out at Ole Lady Fenton's, right down the river a ways, an' it looked like a cinch to slip up here an' git Sheriff Joe er Link er maybe both as they crossed the river. When we got here, though, we heared two fellers talkin'. Couldn't make out what they said, but we got up close enough to tell it was Sheriff Joe with Link Means as a prisoner."

Handy coughed, put his hands to his head and went on:

"We was glad Joe had succeeded in his plan to capture Link. We figgered we had 'em both right where we wanted 'em. Link would be blamed fer whatever happened to Sheriff Joe, an' if Link got a slug through the head the county'd be saved the price of a rope. If we got 'em both, it would look as if they'd met an' shot it out. So we up an' whanged away, but we made a bad guess an'——"

A spasm of pain, and the outlaw lapsed into unconsciousness.

"Two o' you boys ride down to Ole Lady Fenton's an' git a spring wagon," Sheriff Joe ordered. "We got to git Handy an' his pals to town."

As the possemen left on their errand, Deputy Dick turned to Link.

"How come you to git that pellet in the arm?" he demanded.

"Jest as I reached Sandy Ford I hears a gun crack an' feels a big pain in my left arm," Link related. "I looks up an' there is Sheriff Joe holdin' a gun on me. All I could do was set my horse till he comes over, gits my guns an' hangs 'em on his saddle horn. He ties my good arm with his lariat, an' acrost the river we starts, me in front. A floatin' chunk hit that skittish horse of his'n on the leg an' his mount jumps sky high, right now. Dumps him in the river, an' that's how come he got his clo'es all wet."

Link paused while Deputy Dick rolled a cigaret for him.

"The splashin' scairt my horse," he went on between puffs. "He romped up the bank an' into this timber. But Sheriff Joe was back in the saddle quicker'n a horse can switch his tail. He overtaken me right over yonder. We had jest got off so he could tighten our cinches when the shootin' started. We knowed who it was from their voices. It was three ag'in one an' a half,

me bein' hurt like I was. I guess Joe thought I ought to have a fair chance, fer all at once he tells me I'm his deputy. If I hit one o' them Barlows, it'd help him out that much, an' besides I'd have a legal right. Then too, if them petty larceny out-laws got me, they'd be charged with killin' an officer of the law!"

Deputy Dick's eyes widened with amazement, then softened with admiration for his chief.

"Joe always was slick at figgerin' things out," he exclaimed.

"We throwed a lot o' hot lead at each other," Link concluded. "Still at it when you an' your boys surrounded us. I reckon you know the rest."

He threw his dead cigaret into the fire.

"One thing I sure hate about all this," he grinned. "Sheriff Joe lost a plumb good hat in the river."

THE two possemen now returned with the commandeered spring wagon from Old Lady Fenton's ranch. Into it the unconscious Handy Kline and the bodies of his two dead pals were placed. Another deputy having rounded up Link's and Sheriff Joe's horses, the whole party mounted and jogged slowly down the road toward the distant county seat.

"Ride on ahead, boys," ordered Sheriff Joe presently, slowing his horse to a walk. "I want to talk to Link."

Embarrassment, apprehension, admiration all mingled in his voice.

"I've heared a lot o' tall yarns," he quavered, "but I never heared one as slick an' pleasant soundin' as what you told the boys back there. I reckon you'll stick to it. How come you to figger it out?"

Link affected a concealing, indifferent drawl.

"You coulda killed me in that fight, Sheriff, an' made sure nobody ever would hear how an outlaw saved your life. It woulda been laid to the Barlow gang, an' nobody would ever got wise to the facts. An' you could have let Nosey Neff plug me, 'stid o' knockin' him out o' that tree."

"An' you coulda plugged me fatal, Link, an' let the Barlows git the blame. When you didn't I knowed you was too square ever to spread what happened to me at Sandy Ford. But I never expected you to slick things over like you did."

"Sheriff, you're mighty hard on us that

gits tangled up with the law. But you're too damn game to be laughed out o' the country fer somethin' you couldn't help. I got to thinkin', too, about them kids you told me of."

They rode on in silence a while. As Link groaned from the pain in his arm, Sheriff Joe reached over, something of paternal solicitude in his manner, and eased the sling about his neck.

"I been doin' some thinkin' myself," he said, a husky note deepening his voice. "There's that girl up in Newbrasky an' all. As a bandit, there's charges ag'in you.

Offsettin' that is your record as my deputy in roundin' up the Barlow gang, to say nothin' of your share of the reward. But you'll have to face them charges, that's the law."

Link sighed dejectedly.

"Yes, I know. An' I figgered so strong on leavin' this country, settlin' down an' goin' straight."

Then his eyes brightened with hope as Sheriff Joe said warmly:

"Don't git downhearted, Link. The judge will parole you if I say so—and I'm a-gonta say it good an' strong."

WHAT PRICE HUMOR

By KENNETH ROGERS

IN A certain Oklahoma regiment of artillery, training at Fort Sill early in the War, there were a number of husky young bucks from various Indian tribes. They were willing soldiers, and proved their worth in action later in France.

On the prairie near camp there was an abandoned dugout. The dugout had remained intact, chiefly because it possessed a remarkable door. This door was of sheet iron, substantial and heavy.

One afternoon I happened to observe an Indian, known vaguely as Joe, in the vicinity of the dugout. He was off duty, and was merely killing time. He drew open the iron door, stared curiously, and entered, allowing the door to close behind him.

Next I observed two other privates of Joe's race watching him from camp. As he disappeared they strolled toward the dugout. Then, with the most solemn demeanor, they gathered a quantity of large stones. I waited for developments.

The iron door began to swing open. One of the pair before it moved deliberately and a sizable stone struck the sheet

iron with a resounding clang. The door went abruptly shut.

A moment went by. The pair outside were as solemn as ever. When the door edged open an inch a second time, another rock banged against the iron. The door remained shut.

The performance continued the entire afternoon. Joe, in the dugout, made many attempts to emerge, and retreated each time. The two outside tossed rock after rock. Apparently they were having the time of their lives. Yet never a word did they utter and never a smile cracked on their solemn faces.

It came time to get back to camp. Joe, who had given no sign for an hour, made a last tentative move to open the door. He was permitted to do so. He came out, warily. Before the dugout his two tribesmen sat looking at him. He returned the scrutiny a moment, and then strolled over and joined them. And the three walked solemnly back to camp.

I'm still trying to figure out who had the good time that afternoon on the prairie, Joe or the two outside.

Everybody's Meeting PLACE

*Where writers, readers and the editor gather
for informal discussion*

THE other day I had lunch with a man who is the author of many fine and thrilling stories. He is a big man, in his thirties, hard of body and shrewd of mind. He has the disconcerting habit of saying exactly what he thinks, and his talk was both refreshing and illuminating. I shall not give his name, for while he would disdain to hide behind anonymity by deliberate request, he was obviously not speaking for publication.

"My bank called up this morning," he told me in the course of the conversation. "They wanted to inform me that my account was overdrawn. I said that I was sorry, and would cover the shortage immediately. They said in turn that that would be fine, and nothing further was discussed.

"Now I've been banking at the same place for half a dozen years. I know the cashier well, because I make it my business to keep in touch with him no matter where I happen to be, in Paris or in Peking or at home. He looks after my interests, and I look after his to the extent of causing him the minimum of embarrassment with overdrafts and such. He was not worried this morning, because he knows that I can sit down and sweat for a week over my typewriter, and deposit a thousand dollar check with him at the end of it.

"We respect each other, that cashier and I. Yet each of us thinks the other is just a little bit crazy. I think he's crazy to

tie himself to a desk in a place filled with cages and counters for the rest of his life, and he thinks I'm crazy to be spending my years dashing about the world without a provident thought in my head. I believe he'll end up a rich man, and he probably expects me to wind up in the county poor-house.

"Now, I can make money. I can make plenty. I have entered trading ventures and come out with a fat stake, and if there had been inducement enough, could have repeated indefinitely, branching out further each time. But if I had settled in China, where I like to visit but would hate to reside, what would I know of India or South America or our own West? I know those countries and have many friends in them, and they make me welcome when I turn up every now and then. Perhaps it's true that I have no home of my own, but the places where I make myself at home are infinite in number and are scattered over the ends of the earth.

"I sent my cashier friend a check this morning. Fortunately that was possible. I am sitting down to a crackerjack of a yarn this afternoon. When I cash in on that I'll buy a ticket for some train bound west, shake hands with my friend, and be off. And as we part, each of us will smile and shake our heads and feel sorry for the other and not envy him in the least.

"Well, which of us do you think is right?"

The question, I knew, was rhetorical.

All one can say is that they're both right. The only question one can ask, and which every man must answer for himself, is:
Which would you rather be?

HOB0

ONE of the nicest short stories in this issue is *Bindle Stiff*, by an author new to EVERYBODY'S, WILLIAM DONALD BRAY. In the course of our correspondence he had something to say about himself and the world of the migratory worker. This is quoted from his letter:

To get the historical part of this low-down on myself over with as quickly as possible: I was born in Chicago, at the time of the World's Fair. However, I was not one of the exhibits. On reaching the age of self-determination, I followed geological work as a vocation; and, occasionally, the catching of armfuls of box-cars as an avocation. The latter pursuit sometimes calls for quicker thinking—and action.

Most of the men who ride the rattlers live the emigrant life of the nineteenth century in the midst of the conveniences of the twentieth. Following seasonal work, they must keep on the move. When the beet harvest is over in Colorado, or the potatoes are out of the ground in Idaho, or the last apple knocked in Washington, the migratory worker must go elsewhere. When all other localities are exhausted, there is always Los Angeles. I believe the standard California road stake is still fixed at \$3.85.

They see the seamy side of things. They get a different slant on society from the person who knows only front door manners. Still, many of them are considerate and rather fiercely independent. And sometimes, as in the character I have tried to picture, they retain or develop ideals finer than the standards of a society that disregards them.

William Donald Bray.

AN AMIABLE KICK

THE following letter rather startled me when I picked it up from my desk. Then I thought there must be a catch in it. I wondered if someone, to use a salty old phrase, were not pulling my leg. But the postmark testified to the fact that it actually came from the West, from Colorado. So I read it again, and pretty soon upset the decorum of an editorial office by several hearty and appreciative chuckles.

Here is the letter:

I am somewhat like our friend Will Rogers, all I do is read. Then I get up, walk around a while, come back and read some more.

My reading lately has been stories of Western life such as are found in EVERYBODY'S and other magazines, and I enjoy some of them, for I was, and what is left of me is, part of that West that has passed and gone. For over fifty years I have lived in the country between Hays City, Salt Lake, Santa Fé and the northern edge of Wyoming.

But this is not a story of my life. What I want to say is this. When I read that the two-gun killer stops to twirl the cylinders of his deadly .45 before entering the dance hall and slaying the waiting victim—and then empties his two guns only to graze somebody's hat, it makes me smile.

When I read that all the heroes ride pinto horses, it makes me wonder. When the ranchman's daughter puts on her riding breeches, powders her nose, and goes out with her father's punchers to brand wild bulls, it makes me grin. And when the old cattleman gives his cowboys bull whips to drive the cattle to the roundup, it makes me laugh!

But when the lady owner of the biggest ranch in Arizona sends her waddies out on the blazing desert to rope fifty she cattle and take them to a dairy farm, I get up and go out in the yard.

Then I come back and read some more and I find that the authors have all forgotten how to write United States and are shooting foreign language at me, and my wife comes in to see if I have swallowed my pipe, or something. I wish these authors would read what Mark Twain says about them.

The last story I read was about a poor cow-puncher that had to shoot his horse out on a sandy desert because it had broken its leg in a prairie dog hole. (What the dogs lived on was not stated.) Then he cut the bark from a cedar tree and carved a Greek quotation on it with his hunting knife. I wanted to know what it was so I cut it out and gave it to my granddaughter to take to school and find out what it meant. She brought it back and said the professor told her he did not know what it was unless it was a Chinese laundry ticket, so I am writing this letter in hopes that you will understand what some readers have to think about besides their meals. I did not read all these stories in EVERYBODY'S.

Very truly yours,

H. A. Wells,
Denver, Colorado.

Mr. Wells is a gentleman with whom I'd like very much to sit down in a shady spot some summer afternoon, and talk things over. He speaks my language. There come moments when I too get up and walk around a while before coming back to read some more.

But that's not the case with the stories which appear here. I feel rather flattered that friend Wells picked out EVERYBODY'S to register his plaint with. I can assert without hesitation that no magazine in

this field draws more on Western authors who write from the very soil of their country than EVERYBODY'S. I know them; some through long correspondence, some in close friendship. Their fiction characters are people they have seen and observed, people whose very turn of thought is familiar to them.

Well, Brother Wells is no more hard-boiled than I am. The stories he will find in EVERYBODY'S have to be those which do not permit me to get up and walk around. They are, rather, those which hold me in my chair until I have read them through to the very last word.

A VENTURE IN OLD HATS

I MUST disclaim any responsibility for the ethics involved in the incident narrated in the following letter. And that disposed of, read it and see if you too are not knocked for a whole row of atolls!

Reading *The Secret Lagoon* puts me in mind of an old uncle of mine who used to visit our house and regale us youngsters with wild tales of his past on the South Pacific. He had run away from home in his youth, and very nearly caused my generation in the family to decamp en masse and follow his example. Certainly he made the South Seas seem like a languorous paradise, joyfully welcoming any son of Adam adventurous enough to travel there.

Among his stories there were many, doubtless, which were more dramatic than truthful. But one yarn was vouched for by my father, and besides it sounds too good to question.

In San Francisco this uncle found a second-hand store overloaded with women's discarded hats. They were priced at ten cents each; take your choice. Now only a man of strong imagination would care to burden himself with a stock of old hats on the eve of sailing for Papeete as second officer on an Islands trader. But he was a man of particularly strong imagination.

He bargained with the owner of the collection, and secured the lot at five cents per hat. He carried them aboard with him and stowed them away. The ship sailed a day or so after.

Now my grandfather had been a God-fearing man, and he had brought up his sons on the Bible. My uncle knew the Book well, having heard it read, quoted and discussed all during his youth. And in the Islands the missionaries were making advances, so that whole villages and microscopic kingdoms had taken to Christianity. Much of the white man's religion was bewildering, but they had learned to accept without question any new feature disclosed to them, however incomprehensible.

At the first of the outer islands touched by the ship, my uncle went ashore carrying part of

his investment in old hats. He knew a smattering of Kanaka talk, and when he commenced to harrangue the natives on the beach, they left off the customary festivities of reception and listened gravely. They may have been a bit disappointed when they found themselves in for a sermon, considering that about all the religion they could assimilate was being handed out at the missionary's chapel further up the beach. But like good sports they were courteous to their guest, and gave him ear.

The gist of the sermon was that they were the most ignorant and benighted of Christians. Ay, and they had no knowledge at all of the admonitions of St. Paul. And the chief among these was that all women must be covered in worship. Was it not said, I. Corinthians 11, 5: "But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoreth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven."

To the natives this was perfectly appalling news. How were they ever to make amends, who had never worn head covering in their lives? And lo, my uncle to the rescue! By the miraculous prescience of the white man he had somehow known that they would be wanting headgear for their women. Dozens of hats he had with him, and in the goodness of his heart he was parting with them for practically nothing in trade.

Well, my uncle had to go back to the ship and get the rest of the hats. He sold out his stock on the spot. The stuff he collected in barter multiplied his original investment some perfectly dizzy number of times. And they do say that the church procession the following Sunday, what with big hats and little hats, floppy hats and hard hats, pink hats and purple hats, would just simply have knocked you for a gool!

Paul Anderson,
Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

SHOP TALK

EVERYBODY'S has discovered for itself another remarkably able young writer. R. W. ALEXANDER, author of *The Pirates of Pindoro* in this issue, writes that he is living in Ireland at present; that he is twenty-three, and, though he has been around a bit, has not yet had time to see all of the world he intends to; that the high spots of his career have been the publication of his first book at twenty-one and the time he went broke in Detroit and had to put his typewriter in hock to raise a grubstake . . . Most of the others in this number are fairly well known to you. It is a good issue of what I may pardonably believe to be a good magazine. At least, so very, very many readers tell me . . . The July issue will take us to some very unusual settings for romantic action. *Gun Cargo* by MURRAY LEINSTER is a novelette of Achin, the

northern part of Sumatra. I looked up "Achin" in the encyclopedia, and what I found there about that fierce corner of the world put an ever keener edge on a most exciting story. Look it up yourself . . . *The Gray Wolves* by MAJOR MALCOLM WHEELER-NICHOLSON is a novelette of the American Expeditionary Force in Siberia. Plenty happened in that grim land, and here is one of the most dramatic episodes . . . Besides these, there begins a two part novel of the Western ranges, *Crooked Trails* by DON CAMERON SHAFER, and half a dozen good short stories appear by Spears, Pendexter, LaCossitt and others.

THE LITTLE CREW OF HEROES

THIS spring, no doubt, a new crop of long distance flyers will arise, searching for additional records to smash and other oceans to conquer. If what has happened in the past is a token, some of them are doomed to failure. It is rather terrible to think of the gallant young men and women, vitally alive at the present writing, who may have disappeared forever into the gray fogs of the North Atlantic by the time this magazine comes to you.

Yet some will succeed. They are bound to succeed, by the very indomitable will to victory that is at once their weakness and their strength.

I remember with particular vividness the preparations for the first New York to Paris flight. During all that summer almost two years ago Roosevelt Field on Long Island was one of the most dramatic

spots in the entire land. Daily the great Sikorsky plane was trundled out of its hangar. With infinite patience its motors and instruments were tried, adjusted, tried and adjusted again. About the plane, in and out of hangar, Sikorsky himself hurried, absorbed and tireless. René Fonck, the famous pilot, whose job had not yet begun, appeared on the field in his dashing uniform, stared at the spreading wings, smoked innumerable cigarets, and talked quietly to those with him. Eagerly the mechanics and members of the crew fussed over the ship hour after hour. And in awed circles the inevitable crowd of on-lookers stood and watched.

They failed, those splendid and tragic fellows. But others came the next summer. On Curtis Field the Bellanca ship was to be seen, and the gallant *America*. Chamberlain and Byrd and Acosta were neighbors to the Long Islanders who haunted the fields. And then one day an incredible youngster soared out of the west. Lindbergh had joined the company of adventurers who looked like normal men and proposed to do what no normal man could imagine himself attempting.

Those were stirring times! Eventually (and who will venture to doubt it?) the most commonplace among us may cross the ocean by air and consider it all in the day's work. You may; I may myself. And if I do, I shall live again for a moment in the bated suspense of those moonlit Long Island nights, when the whole world waited for a little crew of heroes to make history.

WILLIAM CORCORAN.

The News of
Next Month



CROOKED TRAILS

By DON CAMERON SHAFER

A novel of romance and stirring action in a far corner of the West that will be forever raw frontier.

THE GRAY WOLVES

By MALCOLM WHEELER-NICHOLSON

A novelette of Yankee men in action in grim Siberia.

GUN CARGO

By MURRAY LEINSTER

A novelette of Sumatra when the Achinese hillmen ran amok.

THE RETURN OF RAGGED DICK

By HUGH PENDexter

A tale of the Western plains

And six fine short stories—"The Whistling Pigeons of Peking", a yarn of General Joe Thompson by L. G. Blochman; "The Friends", another story of the modern freebooters by Henry LaCossitt; "Guardians of the Sheep", a Western yarn by Raymond S. Spears; and others equally worth reading. And there is another long instalment of Thomson Burtis' thrilling serial.